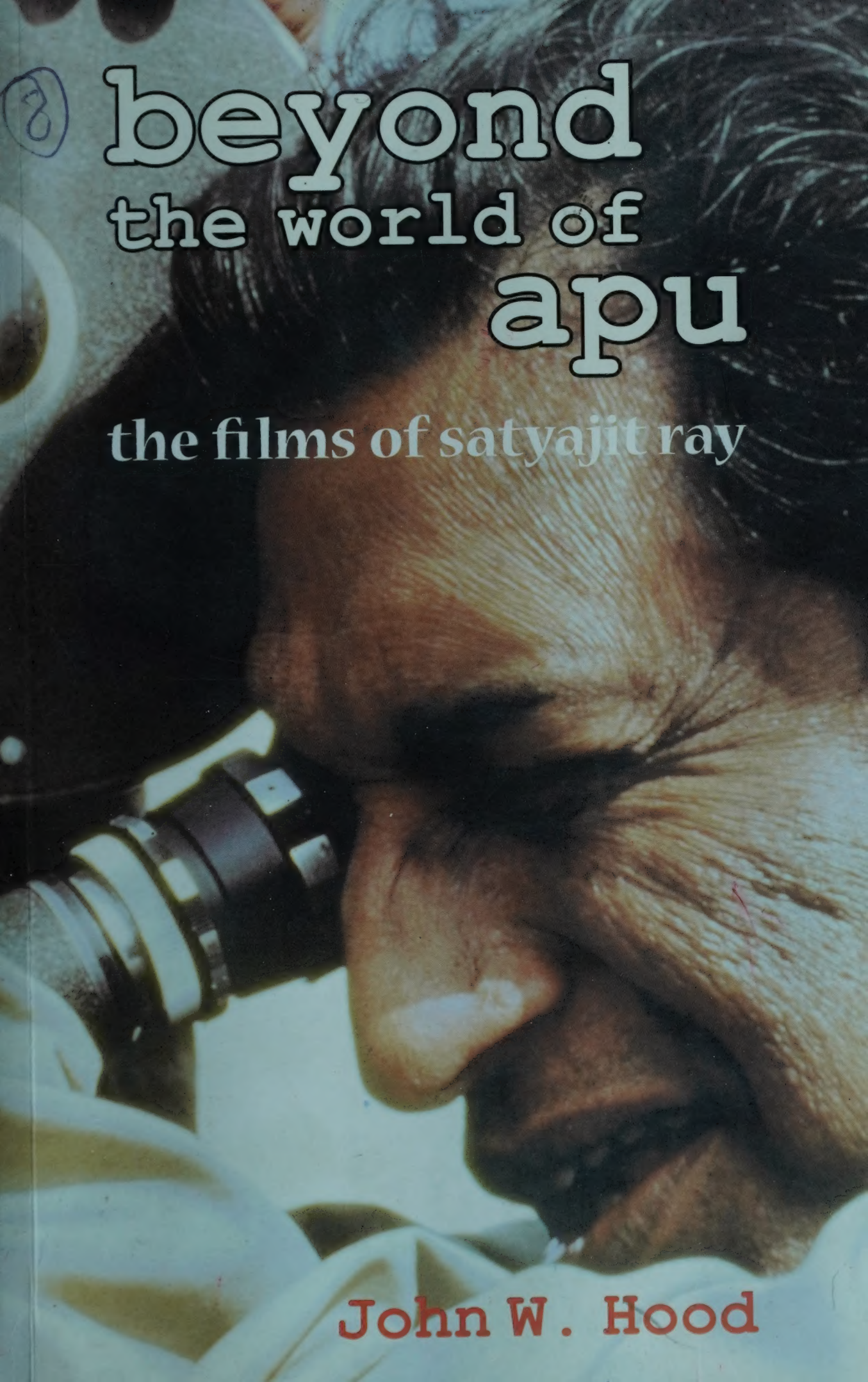

beyond the world of apu

the films of satyajit ray

John W. Hood

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John W. Hood was born in Melbourne in 1944. He majored in Philosophy and Indian Studies at the University of Melbourne, where he also took his Ph.D. degree on Bengali vernacular historiography, specialising in the work of the late Professor Niharranjan Ray.

He is a recognised scholar of Indian art cinema, and has written books on the works of Mrinal Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta. His *The Essential Mystery: Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema* is published by Orient Longman. He is a noted translator of Bengali Literature, having translated the fiction of Prafulla Roy and Buddhadev Guha and the poetry of Buddhadeb Dasgupta. He has also translated the classic *History of the Bengali People* by Niharranjan Ray.

John W. Hood divides his time between his homes in Melbourne and Kolkata.

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Foreword by

Buddhadeb Dasgupta

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Dedicated to
my esteemed mentor and friend,
Prafulla Roy

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Foreword

By the time I was ten I had read Bibhutibhushan's novel, *Pather Panchali,* twice and I was so struck by the story that the characters of the novel stayed long in my mind. Then, when I was just twelve, I saw Satyajit Ray's film based on the novel in a small town where my father was posted. Perhaps that was the first and the last time that I saw the characters of a novel projected so faithfully on celluloid – just the way I had imagined them when I read the book. That was the beginning of my journey through the films of Satyajit Ray. Not that I am equally enthusiastic about all of his work; indeed, I have strong reservations about some of his films. Nevertheless, I believe that it is mandatory for any prospective filmmaker to see Ray's films a number of times in order to learn about the interweaving of craft with creativity.

A long time later, when I was a college student, I met Ray at his Lake View Road apartment. I was most struck by his height, his bass voice, his British-like manners and, of course, his eyes. The impression was so powerful that I find it extremely difficult to disown his presence. Subsequently I had the chance

to meet him on many occasions, such as in Venice in 1981, where I was showing one of my films in the competition; Satyajit Ray was one of the international jury, along with Andrei Tarkovsky and others. He liked my film very much and was free with his praise for it to the press and his many friends. He was always like that, ever generous with his encouragement for younger filmmakers whose work claimed his attention.

I am sure he did not create such a striking impression only with me, but also with everyone who met him, Indian or non-Indian. Among them were authors who wrote books on him and his work. I have not read them all, but I must say that whatever I have read I have not found to be always a notably objective criticism of his films, for Ray's charisma has so often guided the writer's pen. I understand that it is often very difficult to break free from this unseen influence and write a critical analysis that is truly objective.

Although John W Hood may deem it his misfortune never to have met Satyajit Ray, at least he was never shadowed by the great man's overwhelming personality. Thus it has been possible for him to be completely detached and write such objective interpretations. This work is quite original in that it discusses in considerable depth and detail all of Ray's films. It is a careful, critical analysis, well reasoned and without any attempt to fit the author's views to a pre-conceived, academically popular theory, something which, unfortunately, I have found in so many of the writings on Ray. It is very important to distinguish between positive, reasoned criticism and flattery. I have always believed it to be an injustice to the artist to rate his lesser works alongside his greater ones. In the creative process it is only natural that an artist's endeavours will not all bear the same quality of brilliance. It would be silly to try to equate *The Taming of the Shrew* with *Hamlet* and would be unjust to Shakespeare.

Of paramount importance in writing on any of the creative arts is the neutrality of the writer. I have seen in India how personal acquaintance and petty antagonism have so often blurred

an assessment of a film, a book or a work of art. Certainly John Hood's book has avoided such pitfalls. After I read the manuscript, it was clear to me that he has undoubtedly maintained his objectivity. This is to some degree because the author has kept a foot in two streams. For decades he has been closely involved in the study of Bengali culture, and this has been enriched by his own Western experience. To a great extent this corresponds with Ray's own life experience. Many of us saw Ray as a man who could have lived as comfortably in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth century, in India or in the West, and his films reflect his cosmopolitan experience.

Another important quality of this book is that the writer, while well-versed in the literature on which Ray based so many of his screenplays, has not been tempted—as so many critics have been—to make critical comparisons between a book and a film, all too often blaming the filmmaker for not being 'true' to the author. There were those critics who rejected even such great works as Ray's *Apur Sansar* and *Charulata* because the filmmaker asserted an independent mind in making the film instead of slavishly following the original text. One of the strengths of this book is that Dr Hood has criticised Ray's films as cinema and not as literary adaptations.

I am sure this book will add an altogether new perspective in judging cinema in its truest sense and will remain a valuable textbook for anyone who wants to become seriously acquainted with the work of Satyajit Ray.

December 2007

Buddhadeb Dasgupta
Kolkata

1 Introduction

Beyond the World of Apu is a personal reassessment. One of the reasons for writing this book was to address certain things I had said about Satyajit Ray's films in a book I started writing in 1995[1]. Reading that chapter some ten years after it was first drafted I could see that several things needed to be corrected, a number of statements needed to be further elucidated and, most important, there were views expressed then with which I came later to disagree and wanted to revise. Changing one's mind may be, to some, an indication of a brittle intellect; I would prefer to think of it as an outcome of continuing thought. Cinema criticism is not a cut-and-dried science in which conclusions once reached become carved in stone. Constant familiarity with texts, both cinematic and literary, will frequently engender new insights, new perspectives and new assessments.

[1] John W. Hood, *The Essential Mystery. Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2000.

Thus, a substantiated acknowledgement of a change of mind, albeit a minimal one, is both a privilege and an obligation.

Satyajit Ray's films are almost as many as Shakespeare's plays.[2] As in Shakespeare's plays, so too in Ray's films there are a few masterpieces and a few inferior pieces, with the rest ranging from varying degrees of excellence to mediocrity; the simple indication of Ray's greatness is that his mediocre and lesser works are clearly outnumbered by those of obvious quality. Such a vast and varied output as his needs a much more extensive treatment than can be afforded by one chapter in a comprehensive book on Indian art cinema.

Satyajit Ray is one of a handful of established icons of the Bengalis, along with the maverick nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Renaissance Man, Rabindranath Tagore,[3] and one of the problems associated with iconic status is the difficulty of discerning between critical judgement and enthusiastic adoration. There is an even greater difficulty, which is having sound criticism accepted by the icon's devotees. Despite the unchallenged popular standing of Satyajit Ray, it is sad that there are very few Bengalis and still fewer Indians outside of Bengal, who have seen many of his films. The class of people to which this kind of discussion applies is relatively small, for a vast number of Indians, it must be said, have never seen a film at all, and many have seen cinema only on television.[4] Nevertheless, there must be many among the Bengali *bhadralok,* the educated middle class who consider themselves pillars of culture and the thinkers of India, who would know far more Bombay commercial films than films of Satyajit Ray, and yet be quick to defend him as one of their cultural giants. By the same

[2] The score is 37-29 in favour of Shakespeare.

[3] A huge tourist promotion billboard near Calcutta airport had him pictured, flanked by Tagore and Mother Teresa.

[4] The immense popularity of cinema in India is very much a middle class phenomenon.

same token many bhadralok homes have a set of the complete works of Rabindranath Tagore in a place of prominence; this does not necessarily mean that they have read much of Tagore. There is, however, a small minority of intelligent, sensitive and well-read (in the sense that films are, indeed, 'read') aficionados of cinema whose knowledge of Ray, often profound and acutely perceptive, extends well beyond *Pather Panchali* and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. It is they who appreciate sound criticism and readily admit that not every Ray film is a masterpiece; while they are by no means iconoclasts, neither are they blind hero-worshippers.

Ray's paramount position in the art cinema of India is undeniable when one looks at the volume of his work and the awards and honours it has won him. The volume is somewhat formidable, and there must be relatively few people who have seen all his films—or who have seen some twenty-nine films of any filmmaker. Thus, it is easy to form a general opinion of acclaim based on, perhaps, a few of his films along with his well published international reputation, but whether or not that opinion is a respectable one is another matter. Furthermore, making judgements about Ray in regard to any of his contemporaries or successors—which is *not* an aim of this book—can only be done on the basis of a thorough appreciation of most if not all of the films of both parties. Merely to assert Ray's greatness, without comparison—which *is* an aim of this book—requires a careful substantiation based on a thorough appreciation of all of his films. Indeed, it is important for Satyajit Ray's own reputation for the critic to clearly demonstrate that his masterpieces are relatively few; it would do him no honour—or justice—to have *Shakha Prashakha* put on the same level as *Charulata* or to have *Agantuk* rated alongside *Aparajita*. There is certainly value in arguing that *Pather Panchali, Aparajita* and *Charulata* are genuine masterpieces, but the value of rating films on a comparative scale, as is done, for example, with international

cricket teams, should be regarded with considerable suspicion. It is often all too easy to declare one film better than another, as I have done on more than one occasion; what is more important is to see each film on its own particular merits, or lack of them.

This book is a critical appreciation of all the feature films[5] of Satyajit Ray. Each film is analysed in detail, with its strengths and, where appropriate, weaknesses being pointed out and argued. I have tried hard to avoid assertions of mere opinion, believing that what is important is the way in which the critic justifies his opinions rather than the opinions themselves. The book, then, aims to be no more than a critical examination of twenty-nine works of art, based simply on the texts themselves. It is not in any way biographical, nor does it make any claim to offer film history; it is simply a textual study, with minimal and incidental deference to the work of others in biography or film history.

I have therefore avoided a chronological approach, essential to biography and history, and have arranged my chapters according to certain themes that I see running through Ray's work. Doubtless, many would arrange the films differently, but the process is to some extent one of convenience, perhaps more cosmetic than organic; at least, that is so in this work, as I would not alter what I have said about any of the films were they in differently arranged chapters.

Chapter Two, 'The Apu Trilogy', discusses three films which, taken together, might well be regarded as the single greatest achievement of the Indian cinema. There is no denying that Ray immersed himself in greatness so early in his career. Indeed, with the exception of *Charulata*, which he made in 1964, he would never fully emulate the greatness of the trilogy. This is

[5] The definition of 'feature film' has been stretched a little to include *Sadgati*, a film actually made for television and running for only 52 minutes.

would never fully emulate the greatness of the trilogy. This is not at all to undervalue the rest of his subsequent work, for the undoubted excellence of so much of it simply underlines the signal mastery of the Apu films. The integrity of this chapter is readily provided by the form of the trilogy, which follows the growth of a Bengali boy from his birth into a humble village family, through his various rites of passage, and culminates in his triumphant yet near tragic coming to terms with himself and his world.

The third chapter, 'An Early Pastiche', is, admittedly, something of a ragbag. Five films from Ray's first twelve years are discussed here, films which have little if anything in common. With the possible exception of *Jalsaghar* they may be described as among Ray's lesser films. It is interesting to note that the first three of them—*Parash Pathar, Jalsaghar* and *Abhijan*—were made in the period between *Pather Panchali* and *Charulata*, while the fourth—*Kapurush o Mahapurush*—was made immediately after *Charulata*. In all of these films, as well as in the fifth, *Chidiakhana*, it would seem that Ray was trying to discover something different, a new path for his creativity, in the process mixing mediocrity with brilliance. *Parash Pathar* seeks to present an urban, adult fable; *Jalsaghar* looks at the final stages in the decline of a member of the Bengali landed aristocracy; *Abhijan* descends into the world of rural shady dealing; *Kapurush o Mahapurush* is a double bill of two quite discrete short films, one about failed love and the other a comedy about religious fraudulence; and *Chidiakhana* is an attempt at a detective film. Ray was not entirely successful with any of these works, yet in varying degrees each one of them bears somewhere or other the mark of a master filmmaker—even the pronounced flop, *Chidiakhana*.

The films of the fourth chapter are roughly contemporaneous with those of Chapter 3 but are, for the most part at least, superior works. In these films Ray looks at the lives and values of middle-class Calcuttans, and it is interesting to note that

only one of them—*Mahanagar*—is actually set in Calcutta.[6] In isolating his characters from their natural environment, Ray presents a seemingly more enhanced perception of them. A number of important issues to do with individualism, women's rights, marital obligation and nationalism are raised and seen in clear relief in *Kanchanjungha*, which is set in the hill resort of Darjeeling; the world of cinema, arguably as popular amongst the middle class of India as that of any other country, is put connotatively in a social context in *Nayak* and is set, for the most part, on a train running between Calcutta and Delhi; and the utter negligibility of the young men in *Aranyer Din Ratri* is highlighted by their isolation in the forest region of Palamau in the state of Bihar. It is in *Mahanagar*, along with *Kanchanjungha* one of Ray's finer works, that the traditionally held values of the Calcutta middle class are rationally and, at times, ruthlessly held up to scrutiny.

All these films are of specific interest, but an incidental value of them is as a prelude to the three monumental films Ray made on his contemporary Calcutta in the seventies and which are discussed in Chapter Five, *The Calcutta Triptych*. These three films are quite unconnected—unlike the films of the Apu trilogy—and yet bear clear relation to one another—unlike the films of the double bill, *Kapurush o Mahapurush*—and so are better described as a triptych than a trilogy, though that term sometimes is used to describe them.

Not only was Satyajit Ray a Calcuttan born and bred, but also what Calcutta has become bears no small mark of the influence of his life and work. It was a symbiotic relationship; Ray took from the city and from the legacy of its former luminaries, and he gave back—mostly in cinema but also in

[6] The name was changed to its more traditional form, 'Kolkata', in 2000, but in Ray's lifetime it was Calcutta, and so that form is used throughout this book.

literature, graphic art and music—his own reflections and interpretations of his city, one of the world's most extraordinary. However, it must be said that in *Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya,* Ray rigorously takes his city to task. The films are set in the turbulent seventies when the extremist Naxalite movement threatened the peace of the great metropolis. Ray takes the cinematically unpromising theme of economic inequity as the basis for what are, it can indeed be said, three superb films. There is an underlying touch of genius in his ability to maintain the central significance of the Naxalites while at the same time keeping them in the background, mostly as little more than a suggestion. In the triptych the amorphous and baffling city itself is a major character, which Ray examines in all its characteristic disorder. The focus in the first and third films is the middle class; in the second film it is the wealthy upper class. The films are candidly critical of the city, exposing it for its callousness and, especially, the moral bankruptcy of its leadership.

The next chapter looks at Satyajit Ray's regard for the unequalled giant of Indian culture, Rabindranath Tagore. A brief examination of Ray's documentary film on Tagore is employed to help justify the filmmaker's sense of debt to the poet, as well as to assert—rather by extension—the influence Tagore may have had on Ray and, incidentally, a degree of similarity between the two. Apart from his creditable documentary film, Ray's cinematic tribute to Tagore is in three films: the triple bill based on short stories dealing with women, *Tin Kanya*; the masterpiece *Charulata*, based on the novella *Nashtanir* and known in English translation as "The Broken Nest"; and the very wordy and imperfect film, *Ghare Baire*, based on the novel of the same name. I have discussed all these films, not according to their worthiness or otherwise as cinematic representations of Tagore, but as cinematic works of art by Satyajit Ray. As literature and cinema are two categorically distinct art forms, there seems to

me to be little point in denying the independence of the one and insisting on its deference to the other.

The next two chapters offer discussion of films relating to India's past. Chapter 7, 'The Cry Against Tradition', deals with two films which expose the perversity of certain elements of Hindu tradition, while Chapter 8, 'An Eye on the Past', looks at two films set in the context of certain actual events in Indian history.

Ray was connected with the reformist Brahmo Samaj which, among other things, championed the power of reason over superstition and took a stand against idolatry and caste. The two films in which he is critical of certain aspects of Hindu tradition are *Devi*, dealing with superstition and idolatry, and *Sadgati*, dealing with untouchability. The former is set in the middle of the nineteenth century and the latter in the 1930s, but it is disturbing to note that both films deal with issues that are still alive today: the Indian press is constantly reporting appalling and often tragic ramifications of extravagances of superstition in many parts of the country, and atrocities committed against Dalits or so-called Untouchables are still a fact of life, particularly in certain parts of rural India. *Devi* was made early in Ray's career (1960), and is notable for the power of its criticism tempered by a compassion for human frailty. *Sadgati* is a much later work (1981) in which an ameliorating humanism is considerably harder to find, for here Ray is at his most frank, sometimes frighteningly clinical and unrelenting in his portrayal of high-caste inhumanity. In some ways there is more to keep these two films apart than to link them together in the same chapter, but on the basis of the nature of their protest and the candour of its presentation they cry out to be treated jointly.

The apparent discrepancies are even greater between the two films discussed in Chapter 8. *Shatranj Ke Khilari* is set amid the controversy and disputation surrounding the annexation by the

British East India Company of the kingdom of Oudh in 1856; *Ashani Sanket* is set in the context of the devastating man-made Bengal Famine of 1943. The time difference between the two events is considerable, as is the distinction between them in nature. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how Ray treats history as distinct from 'period'. In *Shatranj Ke Khilari* he shows a careful respect for historical fact in dealing with the disputations of state, while giving a taste of period in his presentation of the two aristocratic chess-players whose story runs in counterpoint to that of the men of grand affairs. *Ashani Sanket* hardly even mentions the execrable political machinations that brought about the famine, but rather looks at the emergence by stealth of the horrors suffered by millions of innocent and helpless people. Both films are objective accounts—though by necessity limited ones—of what happened, through which Ray allows the viewer to draw whatever conclusions of censure that may be there to be drawn. He certainly does not exploit history but treats it with cautious restraint. Nevertheless, he is first and foremost a filmmaker, who makes no claim to being a historian; thus, the works must be assessed as cinema, not as history.

The four films treated in Chapter 9 fit very easily together. *Cinema for the Young* deals with a truly charming aspect of Ray's work, the films he made for children. Ray's approach to children is more akin to dealing with young adults than the patronising approach to kids inherent in so much popular children's entertainment. In *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* it is Ray's aim to cherish a sense of storybook romance while at the same time giving his young audience a story that requires them to do some thinking; he also endeavours to stimulate their burgeoning moral discernment by offering them notions of right and wrong for them to set in perspective. The other two films discussed in this chapter, *Sonar Kella* and *Jay Baba Felunath,* are exceptionally well-made, intelligent detective stories that appeal to inquisitive young minds as well as to their sense of justice.

Furthermore, it can be said of all four films, but especially the two detective stories, that the appeal is as much to adults as it is to children. Indeed, these two films can well rank among Ray's better works.

Chapter 10 is a sad chapter, dealing as it does with the work of a great filmmaker in obvious decline. The last three films belong together for negative reasons: their excessive verbosity and their lack of artistic depth. Note is made of the fact that the master filmmaker had been suffering poor health since about 1984, so necessitating certain restrictions on how and where and under what circumstances he might continue to make films. Within these limitations Ray's last three films were made. It cannot be denied that they are competent works, but so too are many films made by filmmakers who have none of the genius of Satyajit Ray; what makes a director memorable is not his competence, for that is something that ought to be taken for granted, but his genius. None of the genius that radiated through Ray's better work is to be found in these last films. Along with *Chidiakhana* they make up the lesser side of the great filmmaker.

Of course, Satyajit Ray will not be remembered for his last three films, nor should he be. He will be remembered mainly for the masterpieces: the Apu trilogy and *Charulata*. However, the memory will be enriched by such excellent works as the films of the Calcutta triptych and the originality of such fine works as *Devi, Kanchanjungha* and *Mahanagar*. Peopling the rich memory will be his musical zamindar, his dilettante chess players, the good brahman of *Ashani Sanket* and the callous brahman of *Sadgati*. And, of course, there will always be Feluda, Topse and Jatayu.

2 The Apu Trilogy: *Pather Panchali, Aparajita, Apur Sansar*

Pather Panchali is not necessarily the best Indian film ever made, nor is it even the best film made by Satyajit Ray, but it is arguably the most famous opus in Indian cinema and has, in its half century of existence, achieved virtual iconic status. There are several reasons for this. The most substantial reason is the fact that it was the first Indian film to win major international recognition, being declared Best Human Document at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956. Such acclaim abroad generated enormous public pride at home in what was, at that time, one of the poorer countries of the world, independent of an imperial power for only nine years. It also merits wonder that a work deserving of such critical acclaim should have been made by what amounted to little more than a bunch of amateurs led by a man who had never made a film before and who had been constrained to work on the most taut of shoe-string budgets. Of greater significance is the claim of many—and supported here—that the most compelling justification for the film's fame is that

it is a truly exquisite work of art. Indeed, 1955, the year in which *Pather Panchali* was produced, may well be regarded as the defining moment in the fledgling Indian art cinema, for it marked the setting of a new benchmark of quality cinema and provided an inspiration for other Indian filmmakers and would be filmmakers to dream of making superb works worthy of international acclaim.

Sadly, *Pather Panchali* has had its detractors, the most vocal of whom have been Indians, condemning the film not on any aesthetic grounds but for what they saw as the packaging of India's poverty and selling it abroad in the name of art. There have been many famous expressions of philistinism in independent India, though few more obtuse than this. To describe *Pather Panchali* as a film about poverty, despite its dreary and fundamental actuality, betrays an abject misreading of the film which is more about the triumph of the human spirit than anything that might be seen to minimise it.

The narrative element of *Pather Panchali* is certainly one of the least intricate in any of Satyajit Ray's films; indeed, there is virtually no complexity in the narrative at all. Like the novel on which it is based,[1] the film has no plot as such, but rather offers a series of glimpses of rural life, given integrity by their focus on one particular family in an ordinary village called Nishchindipur. On a less mundane level, both film and novel are true to their title, a simple and literal translation of which is 'song of the road'. Ray's Apu trilogy, of which *Pather Panchali* forms the first part, deals fundamentally with notions of passage, seen in its simplest terms in a boy passing through childhood into adolescence and then into manhood. The 'song' is not composed in a way that modifies the 'road', as would be the case in a film in which plot or story has been carefully developed; rather the

[1] *Pather Panchali,* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay originally serialised in the early 1930s.

'road', long known and easily recognised, is embarked on and the 'song' is a natural response to it. As long as the 'road' passes merely through the village, the 'song' is simple; as the 'road' extends to worlds beyond, as well as running its course through time as well as space, the 'song' becomes more complex, even at times difficult to articulate, so belying, then, the apparent simplicity of the narrative.

A vital part of the journey of Apu, the central character, is his learning that the world is an infinitely bigger place than Nishchindipur and that to comprehend it requires a mind more open and amenable to change than that generally found in the village. Right at the outset of his film Ray shows the reality of small-mindedness and the stifling effect it can have on relations with others. On the roof of a large compound—at one time, apparently, a grand zamindari[2] home but now subdivided and fallen into disrepair—stands the wife of the relatively well off neighbour, Mukherjee, performing *puja* before a holy basil plant. She catches sight of something that instantly transforms her piety into self-righteous anger: a little girl plucking a fruit from one of many trees owned by the Mukherjees. The mean-mindedness of the woman is quickly indicated by Ray as he cuts to a shot of the luxuriant jungle surrounding the house—lush and green, even in black and white—and then reveals Durga as a little girl, quite at home among the trees and bushes. Through a gap in the foliage the girl sees a woman approaching, and she hides for a moment while she passes. The woman is her mother, Sarbajaya, and we may assume that Durga is apprehensive of her disapprobation of what she is doing. Durga then scurries home to stow the

[2] A *zamindar* is a landlord. During the British period, under the provisions of the Permanent Settlement (1793), many of them were able to become extraordinarily wealthy. However, the vicissitudes of imperialist economics also pushed many of them, in time, into poverty.

fruit in a pot, later to be given to her ancient aunt, and to give water to a couple of kittens stowed away in a barrel. To the viewer it is all perfectly innocent and lovely, but not so to the vigilant wife of Mukherjee. There is a cut back to the roof where she is hanging out washing, making her displeasure perfectly clear through her strident voice to all who may hear her. The fundamental substance of her complaint is that the little girl stole a guava. It is hardly a serious crime, and so the woman quickly tries to strengthen her case with the implication of untold nefariousness: "And who knows what else?" By now Sarbajaya is at the well in the yard and in full earshot of her carping neighbour, whose barbs are now indirectly thrown in her direction and allege that she is not bringing the girl up well, suggesting even that one day the child will bring her shame before the whole village. It is clear from Sarbajaya's face that the barbs are felt. Emerging from all of this is the little Durga's carefree zest for life and her mother's vulnerability to whatever the neighbours may say. In the small, circumscribed world of the village pettiness is easily magnified and one's own business is very often public business. And yet, when moral support is offered by a faithful friend who appears beside her at the well, Sarbajaya's pride keeps her aloof from sympathy. These elements will be seen to be prominent, underlying much of the film.

The circumscribed world of the village is manifest not only in the nit-picking gossip of women. Hindu tradition itself has been a powerful agent of circumscription, most especially in the caste system and all that it prescribes and proscribes. The family on whom Ray's film focuses is that of Harihar Roy. At the beginning there are only Harihar, Sarbajaya and Durga, but soon a boy, Apu, is born. Harihar is a traditional brahman who follows the priestly profession. While brahmans are looked up to in Hindu society, even revered, their contribution to the economic well-being of society is less than minimal and, except

for a distinct few, most of them acquire at best a meagre livelihood from the ritual duties they are required to perform.[3] By the early decades of the twentieth century (*Pather Panchali* is set in the 1920s) many brahmans were taking on modern professions in accordance with their higher education, but this was largely an urban trend. In the villages the strength of custom and tradition prevailed, and men like Harihar Roy dutifully followed the profession of their forefathers and quite unquestioningly expected their sons to do the same. In Indian literature the figure of the impoverished brahman is a common ideal, a symbol of selfless devotion to godliness, but such reverence that Harihar might inspire to readers of books is of little comfort to Sarbajaya who has to perform miracles on a daily basis in order to sustain her husband and two children.

Although the centrality of interest throughout the trilogy is Apu, in both *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajita* Sarbajaya is of particular significance, becoming gradually less prominent in the second film as Apu becomes more self-sufficient. In the first film of the trilogy, however, her role is a focal one, for it is she, given her extraordinary qualities of forbearance and selfless, silent suffering, who enables the family to survive. Her cares are constant—the merest hint of a smile after the birth of Apu is the nearest we get to seeing her experience happiness—and she carries them with remarkable control, unfortunately using the old Indir Thakrun as a scapegoat for her frustrations and, on one sorry occasion, dramatically losing her temper with Durga. To those who have no understanding of severe want, some of her complaints may seem petty, such as her quibbling with Indir Thakrun over the old woman's helping herself to a few chillies. She also complains briefly to Harihar about the amount he spends on tobacco and is shocked to hear him promise to get

[3] We may note how Gangacharan Chakravarti in *Ashani Sanket* ekes out a living as a teacher and a medical practitioner in addition to his work as a priest. See Chapter 8.

Indir Thakrun a new shawl. This is not meanness as long as she is unable to afford medicine and decent food for Durga, who is inclined to feverishness, and clothes for Apu, who is being sent off to school in rags. The house is in sore need of repair, and they owe the Mukherjees five rupees.[4] She is, it must be said, callous to Indir Thakrun, upbraiding her for going begging to another relative for a new shawl, so belittling Harihar, who would never have kept his promise to her anyway, and even if he had he would have had to contend with Sarbajaya's hostility. Again Sarbajaya drives the old woman out of the house. Then, when Indir senses that her end is near and she comes home to die, Sarbajaya cruelly turns her out again. Nevertheless, she makes extraordinary demands on herself for the sake of her children, sitting up late at night and mending clothes by candlelight. A shot of her lovingly covering the two of them as they sleep reminds us of her tenderness. Then she must suffer the indignity of sneaking out of the house early in the morning to sell some of their utensils in order to buy rice, and when the rice is exhausted and there has still been no word from Harihar, who had gone away in search of work five months earlier, her worries become even more acute. When her kindly friend offers her help, the proud Sarbajaya's embarrassment is only intensified. And then, after she chastises Durga at the goading of the carping Mukherjee woman, she suffers sorely, just as she will some time later when Durga dies of a fever. There is very little happiness in Sarbajaya's life, apart from her son, Apu.

While we may feel profound compassion for Sarbajaya in her oppressive plight, we must also note that whereas her neighbour is ready to speak ill of her and of Durga, Sarbajaya is even more heartless to the ancient Indir Thakrun, the old aunt for whom Durga steals fruit and to whom she is so devoted. Indir Thakrun,

[4] Some idea of the value of this amount may be gauged from the fact that Harihar's salary from the zamindar, Ray, is three rupees a month.

a distant relative from Harihar's side of the family, is well into her eighties or even older and, as is so often the case with elderly people and little children, the bond between her and Durga is very close. Maybe Sarbajaya's pride is somewhat buffeted by this closeness. She complains, hardly realistically given the frailty of the old woman, about the burden of having an extra mouth to feed, and makes it unmistakably clear to Indir Thakrun that she is unwelcome in their house. Harihar, of course, bound up in his own world, is hardly aware of her.

In many ways Indir is a sad and pathetic old character, but she is also spirited, as seen in her staunch protection of Durga on a couple of occasions, and proud, as reflected in her packing her few belongings and walking out in the face of Sarbajaya's insults. After she first leaves, Ray shows the path of her departure in reverse in bringing her back after the birth of Apu, a suggestion here that the departure and return have been somewhat repetitive. Indeed, we see her walk out and come back again several times in the film. Generally, she inspires pathos and pity, especially in such shots as the close shot of her trying to thread a needle so that she can darn the enormous holes in her tattered old shawl, muttering all the while about the injustice of an old woman's having to do such a thing. Particularly moving is her wistful singing of a well known song anticipating death in which she beseeches a boatman to row her 'to the other side', a song which is even more emotionally featured later as it is heard over the shots depicting her death and disposal.

When Sarbajaya casts Indir out for what turns out to be the last time, Ray offers two very telling close-ups of her face, quite clearly depicting a sense of self-doubt, even guilt, at her dismissal of the old woman. Ray wants to show that Sarbajaya's callousness is not undiluted, and also that it must be seen in context. The tremendous strain suffered by her is in marked contrast, at least in the first half of the film, to the buoyant optimism of her dilettante of a husband. As we have seen, she has to bear the

abuse of her supercilious neighbour, an indignity made more difficult by the fact that Sarbajaya has been obliged to borrow money from her; hence, as long as the debt remains unpaid, the woman is able to maintain a position of moral superiority over Sarbajaya. However, all this is of little consequence to Harihar, whose work—whenever he has any—often takes him away from home and the trials endured by his wife. As he sees it, she may have difficulty feeding the family, but she feeds them, nevertheless, and clothes them too. He recognises that the house is in urgent need of repair, but he sees no need to worry today about something that can be deferred. Harihar is a dreamer who lives in the largely make-believe world of the future, counting on such fantasies as his plays being bought by *jatra*[5] companies and making him rich. Like Sarbajaya he has his personal pride, but his is foolish; for example, when he is asked to serve as a priest to a certain family who are wealthy but of low caste, he demurs on the issue of caste purity and, rather than make a commitment to a request, he would delay lest he be seen to be desperate for the work being offered. Harihar's naiveté may well be explained in the light of his very limited knowledge of the world and how it works.[6] Sarbajaya, of course, is just as limited – even more so, given her lack of any education – but the reality of her daily domestic experience has bred in her an unremitting sense of gloom.

At the beginning of the film Harihar earns a pittance as a rent collector, but has been offered a job doing accounts for a landlord by the name of Ray. Thus, along with his occasional priestly earnings, the future, as he paints it to Sarbajaya, looks rosy. On top of that, of course, will be the immense income he will get from being a famous writer for *jatra* companies. Sarbajaya

[5] *Jatra* is an extremely popular (and often very lucrative) itinerant folk theatre.

[6] We might also wonder at the ignorance of the 'highly educated' Brahman, Gangacharan, in *Ashani Sanket*. See Chapter 8.

is encouraged, though not enthused (she probably has heard much the same tune sung before), and for a moment she shares the dream: "You'll have respect in the village, and you'll teach the boy. We'll have two meals a day and new clothes twice a year. What more could we want?" And as though such opulence is not enough, Harihar adds that in two years they will be free of debt (they never will), the house will be repaired (it never will), and they will be living in comfort (they never will).

The dreams of the hapless Harihar would seem to be but tantalising. He gets his job with Ray, but the zamindar experiences difficulties and Harihar has to go for three months without pay, and the dream appears to be turning sour. But then he gets the money owing to him, along with news that a rich farmer would like him to perform religious duties in his house. With renewed optimism Harihar comes home with a fish with which to celebrate, and soon sets out to visit the rich but low-caste farmer. He tells Sarbajaya he will be gone for about a week; in fact, to her utter despair, he will return only after five months. The farmer's offer falls through and once again Harihar is obliged to roam about looking for work. His life would seem to be nothing but a series of hopes presented, only to be denied. At the end of the film, on the eve of their departure for Benares, he talks to the village elders about how failure has encompassed his life, listing his inability to repair his house, their fifteen years of continuing debt, his ambition to be a writer and the fact that his manuscripts have been eaten by worms, his failure to educate his son and the death of his daughter. "Sometimes it is necessary to leave the ancestral home."

The two male members of the family are not as prominent as the females. Harihar's frequent and prolonged absences naturally minimise his role in the film, while Apu is occupied only in his lessons, playing games and having things done for him by his mother and his older sister. Indeed, as far as the children are concerned, Durga's role is a much more substantial one than

Apu's. Ironically, Durga, who dies when barely a teenager, is for most of the film a great survivor. Right at the beginning we see that she has developed her survival skills when she astutely avoids her mother when gathering—or stealing—fruit. A wonderful shot sees her crouched amid the undergrowth, so small that she can almost hide behind a large leaf, watching for her mother to go by. She is an incorrigible pilferer of fruit, not because she is by nature a thief, but because she is so often hungry. Moreover, most of what she gathers goes to her old aunt, for whom she cares very greatly. She is a remarkably uncomplaining child, buoyed by a vibrant optimism and taking life as it comes to her. There is also a suggestion of the innate inferiority of being female. Certainly Sarbajaya displays more overt love for Apu, and while her brother can run about and do as he likes, Durga, when still a little girl, is told by her mother that girls of her age must take a much bigger part in looking after the house. She helps whenever asked, and looks after Apu happily and tenderly. It is in her nature, it would seem, to care for others, for she even manages to make a gift to a beggar, taking care not to be seen by her mother. She is also a stoic sufferer, taking the cruel punishment from her mother for allegedly stealing Tunu's beads and enduring her final illness without even a whimper. She takes a great joy in simple things, as seen, for example, in the shots of her revelling in the first monsoon downpour.

There is some significance in there being very little to be said about Apu, at least in this first film of the trilogy. His importance lies simply in the fact of his being. He is cosseted by both his sister and, especially, his mother. So impressed is he by the *jatra* that comes to their village that he takes great joy in dressing up as a prince with a magnificent false moustache and a silver crown. But when he is, in fact, naughty in helping himself to some silver paper horded away in Durga's trinket box, Sarbajaya protects him, telling Durga, "You're too old to have a trinket

box anyhow. Now go and find the calf." And yet in his child's mind there is the burgeoning of a sense of the awesomeness of justice as he worries about Durga's guilt or innocence in the affair of Tunu's beads. Then, one of the major lessons he is obliged to learn is the necessary acceptance of death. The discovery of the dead Indir Thakrun is a shock to him, and with her passing Durga, indeed, says goodbye to so much of her own childhood that has died with the old woman. So with Durga's death, Apu's innocence is diminished, being forced to leave much of his childhood behind him too. There are some significant shots of him as he comes to terms with his new solitariness, such as combing his hair himself and going off to buy kerosene from the market. There is a very touching shot of him going off, alone, along the path he once walked with Durga, carrying an umbrella almost as big as himself, while the music heard over is now a lot more serious. There is a clear suggestion that Apu has accepted the obligation to start to grow up.

The film offers some truly charming insights into village life. One of the most memorable is the sequence depicting Apu's introduction to learning. The young man who, in *Aparajita*, holds the world in his hands and a scholarship in his pocket starts his education at the feet of the village grocer who doubles as a formidable tyrant of a teacher, his cane stowed in a bag of sugar beside him, at once tedious and threatening as he serves parched rice to a customer or discusses affairs with one of the village elders while holding up the torch of learning to his young pupils. The cameo performance of Tulsi Chakravarti as the pedagogue-grocer is truly delightful. Then there is the confectioner carrying his delectable wares suspended from either end of a bamboo rod across his shoulders; he sorely tempts Apu and Durga, but of course they never have any money to spend on such luxuries. Durga knows, however, that if they follow him to the Mukherjees' house they might get something from one of the children there. We are then treated to a lovely shot of the

confectioner trotting from right to left of the frame with the pond between him and the viewer, pursued by Durga, Apu and a dog. Ray shows the whole thing as it is reflected on the surface of the water, and so offers a momentary sense of harmony between the children and the natural elements. Then there is a shot of the image of the Mother Goddess at *puja* time[7] and the seasonal largesse of Mukherjee's wife in distributing sweets to the village children. This is followed by a wonderful excerpt from a *jatra* performance, with all its traditional melodramatic histrionics; particularly memorable is the look of intense wonder on the face of Apu. There is a kaleidoscope show bringing the sights of Delhi and Bombay right into the midst of Nishchindipur. When one of the Mukherjee girls, Ranu, is about to married, we see the preparations for the lavish feast that will be central to the celebrations, and we are given a sample of the music performed by the brass band[8] hired for the occasion. There is, at least for the Western viewer, considerable amusement in this, for *Tipperary* is hardly evocative of Bengali culture, while the band's limited musicianship gives a rendition of the World War I favourite not commonly heard, at least outside of rural Bengal. Nevertheless, the wrong notes and inappropriately emphasised phrases do nothing to minimise the rapt attention of the villagers, especially the boys. The images of wondrous coils of brass producing tunes puffed out by magnificently moustachioed musicians enhances the richness of the scene. There is a brief view of the wedding itself, focusing mainly on the girl becoming a bride, but the camera's interest in Durga gives rise to a touch of pathos—we will realise later—as she watches in wonder what she will never experience.

Despite the film's ostensibly thin narrative structure there are some notable moments of drama. The intensity of the scene in

[7] Autumn in Bengal is the time of the great festivals in honour of the goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Kali.

[8] A traditional feature of Bengali weddings.

which Durga is accused of stealing Tunu's beads is paramount among them. Tension is instilled right at the outset with Tunu and her sister, led by their mother, literally bursting through the gates and establishing themselves in a position of strength from which to launch their accusation. Imperiously the mother asserts control, sending one daughter inside the house to fetch Durga's trinket box, which she then proceeds to empty onto the ground with callous contempt. Sarbajaya's civil attempts at reason produce only further hostility, despite the fact that her questions do reveal that the accusers are acting merely on suspicion and without any evidence. The emotion is enhanced with the sudden entry of Indir Thakrun into the yard, and we are treated to a memorable few moments of superb facial acting and camera work. Clearly the old woman has sensed that Durga is in trouble; goaded by her protective instincts she tries to take the prominent position, demanding to know what is going on, but she is studiously ignored. Then Durga enters, having been loyally signalled by a look from Apu to tread warily. She is asked if she stole the beads, and she simply denies the charge. The bullying woman fails to find what she has come to claim and is further frustrated by Durga's denial. She and her daughters leave, and as they do the mother loudly expresses to a passer-by her venom for Sarbajaya and Durga. It is this, probably, more than anything else, that motivates Sarbajaya to do the utterly unexpected: she drags Durga by the hair and casts her out of the gate. There is profuse weeping on both sides: by Durga, who has been hurt physically and emotionally, and by Sarbajaya, who has been shamed publicly and who now realises the enormity of what she has just done to her daughter. The fraught atmosphere is maintained by shots of the look of shock on Apu's face and by the poignancy of the loyal and loving old aunt's tidying up of the girl's humble trinkets. This act of violence is as heart-wrenching as it is cruel, not so much in the act itself, but on account of the assault it has made on the naturally loving

relationship between mother and daughter. There is no doubt that a lingering, indelible remorse will deepen Sarbajaya's grief when she eventually loses Durga.

Laden with emotional tension is the scene in which Harihar returns home after his five-month long absence. We see him first in a long shot as he nears his home. He calls to his children when he reaches the house, now confronted by the picture of damage wrought by the storm that had caused the fatal illness of Durga. He comes into the yard; Sarbajaya meets him on the veranda. What ought to be a joyous homecoming is a very cold reception. Sarbajaya goes through the formalities of welcome, going into the house and bringing out water for him, while he—pathetically, given the circumstances—tries to please her with his presents. The strength of this scene lies in the distance that Ray is able to assert between husband and wife. The exceptional facial acting and mood portrayal by both actors gives the scene an intense credibility, reaching its extraordinary climax when Harihar produces the sari has brought for Durga. It is this which breaks Sarbajaya's stoicism and she bursts into tears, but instead of a woman's cry we hear an ominous wail from the shehnai. The truth goes straight to Harihar's heart, and he collapses with his wife onto the veranda floor. It is an amazing experiment in originality, in that for Ray the realist it borders very close on melodrama. The brilliant artistry of the moment is built by Ray's skill at knowing precisely how far to go and where to stop. The cut is to a close shot of Apu, now more a little man than a little boy, sad eyes in a serious face, brought into affecting relief by the same shehnai music heard over.

There are two superb scenes without dialogue. The first is after Apu has angered Durga by raiding her trinket box. The two children find themselves separated in a vast expanse of *kash* grass[9] after Durga has run off from Apu to teasingly punish

[9] *Saccharum spontaneum.* In appearance it bears a resemblance to pampas grass.

him. Unsure of himself in strange whereabouts and trying to find his sister, Apu's situation evokes an eerie sense of isolation. The only sound comes from the wind and the whistling in the telegraph wires. Ray draws this out just enough to create a build-up for the unexpected vision of ugliness that will come in the form of a train, the first Apu has ever seen, spewing its dirty black smoke over the pure white kash flowers. The moment is by no means a gratuitous one, for the train, despite its ugliness, is a symbol of encroaching modernity and the necessary change which that entails. With the death of Indir Thakrun and more so with the death a little later of Durga, Apu has to respond to change. If he cannot, he may well end up following in the footsteps of his father.

The second scene without dialogue is quite brief and highlights the plight of Sarbajaya during Harihar's lengthening absence. It is early morning, and a high shot reveals Sarbajaya going out to sell what few precious utensils they still possess in order to buy food. She opens both leaves of the gate and shuts them behind her, but one of them swings open again, allowing her to be framed in its space as she hurries down the path. As she goes out of range of the camera, there is an almost immediate fade to her return with rice, this time framed by the space left by both leaves having opened. This internal framing, with its slight variation in the second instance, is indeed aesthetically pleasing, but also has the philosophical significance of visually highlighting Sarbajaya's physical and emotional confinement in the context of her material insecurity.

One could offer many examples of Ray's superb composition and skilful arrangement of sequences. Especially we might note the prelude to the death of Indir Thakrun and its aftermath. After the old woman has been turned away by Sarbajaya for the last time, we see her in a medium long shot beside the pond, while a group of children run excitedly past her after some purpose of their own. Both parties seem quite unaware of each

other. It is a meaningful juxtaposition of youth and age, of vigour and decrepitude, maybe even suggesting that life is rapidly passing the old woman by. A little later Apu and Durga discover her sitting in the undergrowth, seemingly asleep. Durga innocently shakes her, and the now dead body falls inelegantly away. A shot of her battered old tin water pot rolling down the slight incline and into the pond offers a visual full stop. Moments later we see her bier being silently carried away along the path leading from the house, two or three silent shots depicting a brief time of sadness, before life is seen to go on again. Here is a mark of great cinematic art: the economy is extraordinarily tight, while so very much is expressed. This is Ray's genius, reflected in so many various ways in all of his better works.

With its lack of plot and its cogently economic dialogue, the film's wonder lies in its marvellous visual appeal. There are individual gems such as the amusing point-of-view shot of Durga from inside the kittens' bin. There are also several shots of pastoral loveliness, such as one of Durga taking Apu to school along a track directly away from the camera, the forest and paddy-fields spread out before them. Similar to that is a shot of Durga leading the cow directly toward the camera with Apu some way behind her; there is the same rustic landscape, but the interest now is in the sky, with a heavy thundercloud sitting ominously in the middle of the top quarter of the frame.

It is, however, in the latter part of the film that Ray's brilliance as a filmmaker, one who exploits the camera to the artistic full, can be best described. The promise of Harihar's return with money heralds an upturn in the family's fortunes, and Ray depicts this wonderfully well in a sensual portrayal of nature's transition from the oppressive heat of summer to the relief promised by the imminent monsoon. There is first of all a scene of insects darting over the surface of the water of the pond, and soon we see that the breeze is starting to blow up. Peacefulness is suggested by a shot of the dog snuggling with a kitten. The

clouds have become noticeably heavier and the lotuses are becoming animated in the strengthening wind. With a gentle touch of humour Ray shows the first raindrops splashing on the bald pate of an elderly man sitting fishing beside the pond. The narrative significance of all this is then indicated by the shots of Durga and Apu getting caught in the downpour. Apu, visibly frightened, seeks shelter against the trunk of a tree, but Durga luxuriates in the cooling rain, allowing it to run all over her. A little later, when we look back on Durga's sensual delight in the rain, we will note the cruel irony that the comforting monsoon, bringer of life to parched fields, has been the cause of her death.

A superbly executed visual connection between the downpour and Durga's death is shown in a long shot of the confectioner through the window behind the bed to which Durga is now confined. As the confectioner goes on his way, the camera tilts down to reveal in a close shot Durga's sad and wistful face. It is a telling juxtaposition, for there is a powerful poignancy in the confectioner's passing her by, once again—and for the last time.

Again it is the camera that emphasises the worsening of Durga's fever, which it does very effectively by association. We note the bleakness of the house by candlelight and the starkness of its shadows and the wind playing with the loose and rattling door. The protraction of this sequence of images has the ominous effect of establishing the imminence of Durga's death. Then, as the storm intensifies, we see mother and daughter become more fraught, with Sarbajaya holding Durga close to her. The cut to daylight and a view of the material damage wrought by the storm is masterly in its execution and eloquent in its effect. There is no need to announce the worst—this simple cut has done it so well. When the friendly neighbour enters to find Sarbajaya sitting behind Durga and holding the girl's head in her lap, it is as if we know the worst already. The friend's genuine gesture of affection, for all its sincerity, is seen to be cruelly meaningless given the magnitude of the loss.

After Harihar's return preparations are quickly made for the family's removal to Benares, and Ray offers a few more masterly shots with which to tidy up. One is of Apu's discovery of Tunu's beads, secreted away on a high shelf. Loyal to his sister even in death, he takes the cause of that awful day's pain and hurls it into the pond. Once it has plopped into the water, there is a close shot of the surface weed closing over it and declaring the unhappy chapter forever closed. There is a high shot of the dilapidated yard, and then a close shot of the snakes moving in now that the family has moved out.

There can be no doubt that the film is as beautiful a work as it is on the basis of Subrata Mitra's superb camera work, nor can praise of Ray's own contribution to that fundamental element of filmmaking in the composition of shots be in any way minimised. There are ample shots to establish context, while the great number of medium and medium-close shots ensure the interest that a full frame can offer as well as lending an acute sense of intimacy to one's experience of the film. However, notwithstanding the film's visual richness, the enhancement of its overall beauty by Ravi Shankar's music should not be understated, either. Years after *Pather Panchali* Ray noted that he had used professional composers for the music in his first six films, but since then had elected to write his music himself, as he started getting "too many musical ideas of my own, and composers, understandably enough, resent being guided too much."[10] However, in none of the films in which Ray acted as his own composer is the music as memorable as that written by Ravi Shankar for *Pather Panchali*. Ray's use of it is indeed sparing, so maintaining its freshness by the avoidance of overuse. The instrumental passages themselves are wonderfully expressive of the film's essential Indianness as well as serving to complement its various moods and rhythms; indeed, the flute motif that

[10] Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1976, p.71.

readily identifies the film is so hauntingly evocative that it is used again in *Aparajita* to conjure up a fleeting memory of Nishchindipur when the once familiar village has become almost a part of another world.

The reason for Satyajit Ray's first film being honoured at Cannes—for being the 'best human document'—is truly germane to the film's value in the light of the next twenty-eight feature films that Ray would go on to make. Quite apart from his artistic and technical brilliance, he was a filmmaker who celebrated humanity. In a world somewhat obsessed, perhaps, with celebrities and high achievers, it is a mark of genuine humanism to bring into the spotlight the most ordinary of people, neither magnifying their virtues nor painting over their blemishes. Ray reveals his characters' frailties almost as reasons for loving them, while his concern for what is known in art as 'realism' is little other than a reverence for truth. *Pather Panchali* is a rare work of genius that portrays the human condition in its sublime beauty without compromising the reality of its innate imperfections.

The penultimate shot of *Pather Panchali* shows a bullock wagon moving across the frame from left to right; then, in the final shot, the camera falls in behind the wagon to reveal a melancholy composition of Harihar, Sarbajaya and Apu looking back at the home they have just left. Sarbajaya covers her face as she cries, and the wagon sways from side to side as it moves on along the road away from the camera. The opening shot of *Aparajita* ("Unvanquished", 1956) is taken from inside a train, also moving from left to right, across a bridge spanning the vast river Ganges and carrying, we assume, Harihar and his wife and son on the last leg of their long journey to Benares. A simple connection to the previous film has been asserted. A new film has begun. A title identifies place and time: Benares, 1934.

There are many marks of difference between *Aparajita* and *Pather Panchali*. The physical settings are obvious points of

difference, but so too are the much broader contexts that they provide. The world of Benares is immense compared with that of Nishchindipur, and that of Calcutta is considerably even more so. The home in some part of rural Bengal in which Sarbajaya and Apu take up residence after leaving Benares is not shown to be part of any social context worthy of interest, Ray's purpose being simply to locate Apu and his mother. Harihar, unchanged except in his new circumstances from the man we knew in Nishchindipur, dies early in the film, and while Sarbajaya is as constant as ever, we have a new, an older, Apu, with another, older still, to enter the film later on. It is in the development of this character that the film takes on a more obviously narrative form than that of *Pather Panchali,* the narrative evolving around Apu's attraction to the wider world and his consequent growing need to break free from the ties that would bind him to a narrow, parochial existence. More particularly, the mother-son relationship and all its strains and mutual obligations provides the spine of the narrative.

Throughout *Pather Panchali* one could easily take for granted the constancy of Nishchindipur, for the lives of the Roy family are melded with the village where Harihar's ancestors once lived; it is this seeming permanence that allows the viewer to so readily sympathise with the family in their huge emotional wrench in moving away from Nishchindipur at the end of the film. The acute melancholy with which the final shots are imbued is founded on this unanticipated obligation to accept change. On the other hand, the Benares experience is, at least for Apu and Sarbajaya, an interlude. It is, of course, a substantial interlude, taking up nearly forty of the film's approximately one hundred minutes.

There are a number of points of significance in the Benares interlude. One is that it provides Harihar, as a high-caste Hindu, with the ideal place in which to die. The irony is that he achieved nothing much in life and had been able to do so little

for his family, but at least he was able to die in the holiest of cities with water of Mother Ganges on his lips. Another point of significance also carries an irony. The move to Benares, while not minimising the drudgery of the daily life of Sarbajaya, certainly eliminates from it the constant stress and often despair in trying to make ends meet, but this relative comfort comes at a severe cost in the loss of her husband. Indeed, the irony is extended in the move to an even more comfortable life at her uncle's village home, but there she must also suffer the virtual loss of her son and, eventually, die in loneliness. A third point of significance lies in the failure of the most Hindu of cities to establish Apu as a natural inheritor of his father's profession.

Given the integral narrative value of the Benares section, one further point of significance might be noted, which is the superb visual appeal of the city. After the train has crossed the river and the title has established time and place, the very evocative opening shot is of a lone man high on a rampart beside the river calling to the pigeons to come and be fed. The focus soon passes from the man to the birds and, in following them, the camera brings to us the whole vista of early morning life on the banks of the holy river Ganges. It is a wonderful two minutes in which we are able to imbibe something of the variety and richness of pilgrims bathing and worshipping, of priests and pundits preparing for their day's work, of boats plying along the vast river and, rising in splendour and awe, the ancient architecture of the ghats[11] and the myriad temples behind them. In this opening sequence the camera eventually comes to focus on Harihar, establishing him in his priestly role and performing his morning devotions in the river. As the camera follows him home, we are treated to a view of part of the ancient city. Without becoming at all indulgent Ray exploits the visual appeal of Benares, consisting in its variety of levels of elevation and the steps from one to another, its

[11] In this case *ghat* refers to the steps leading down to the river.

narrow, winding lanes paved unevenly with large flagstones, the closeness of the adjoining buildings with their columns and arches, the murals adorning the exterior walls, and the ubiquitous cows. Later we see Harihar at work, reading scripture to a group of elderly pilgrims while, some short distance away, Apu looks on with minimal interest; soon he detaches himself from his father's domain and sets off on his own exploration of the region, marvelling at an exceptionally well-built club-swinger, whose pursuit of the cult of the body might be seen to complement Harihar's cultivation of the soul.

The interior scenes inside Harihar's new home were shot in a studio in a brilliantly designed set that imbibes so naturally the atmosphere established by the external shots of the city, notably in the arbitrariness of the house's design as well as in deference to the dull lighting of the dark and narrow lanes. There is a superb cut, for example, from a shot of night falling on the river to Sarbajaya ensconced in her bleak kitchen. The house is constructed around a dim courtyard, on one side of which is the kitchen where Sarbajaya spends so much of her time, and on the other side is their bedroom; in between is the staircase that leads up to the quarters of the other tenants.

The opening line of the film refers to Apu, as Sarbajaya asks Harihar, who has just returned home, if he has seen 'the monkey'. The first view we have of him is a little later in a shot that recalls a shot in *Pather Panchali* when Durga draws the blanket back from his face to reveal one wide open eye. Now Apu is playing hide-and-seek with another boy, and what we see is a close shot of his big, dark eyes suddenly appearing from around the corner of a building. There then follows a chase through the crowded lanes as the boys run indifferently past a traditional mural and through the throngs of people until Apu, the quarry, confronts a cow standing across the lane, blocking his path. Without a second thought the boy crawls under its belly and runs on home.

The scenes inside the temples were, of course, shot on location. As the Diwali Festival gets underway, there is a vivid scene of the *arati*[12] in the heart of the ancient Viswanath temple, made visually impressive by the pressing crowd, the bare-chested priests, the ancient architecture and relief sculpture, the flowers and the incense, and made aurally exciting by the vibrant chanting of prayers by the priests and the unrestrained striking of percussion instruments. Later there is a memorably light-hearted sequence of shots inside the Durga Bari temple where Apu has come alone to feed the monkeys. Monkeys have religious significance in Hinduism[13] and so are given free rein in temples such as this. There is a quaint juxtaposition of close shots of these mischievous beasts and the relief sculpture on the interior walls and columns of the temple. The sequence closes with an amusing shot of a monkey swinging from the chains of a bell and ringing it.

The representation of the death of Harihar is outstanding in its visual treatment. Ray builds up to it very gently from Harihar's return home in some distress after Sarbajaya and Apu have been to the temple. Sarbajaya is lighting small lamps as part of their own celebration of Diwali. She puts Harihar to bed, and a little later Apu comes home. There is a small and touching scene as Harihar chats with his son, his beaming face reflecting his adoration of the boy as well as his understanding that he is impatient to go back outside and watch the fireworks. This contrast of one slowing down and the other in full flight is underlined as Harihar lies seriously ill, with all the festive noise and the sky lit by fireworks going on outside. After the first night of his illness Harihar believes he is fit to go out. There is a shot at the ghat where Harihar, apparently perplexed, starts to climb the mountain of steps only to be called back to get his spectacles, which he had inadvertently left behind. Again he

[12] The ritual greeting of the deity about to be worshipped.

[13] The monkey-chief, Hanuman, is recognised as almost divine for his faithful devotion to Lord Rama in the epic, *Ramayana*.

starts his ascent. With the camera behind him we note the challenge of the climb ahead of him. The camera then catches him from the top of the steps. He becomes momentarily dizzy, then clutches a pole for support. There is a cut to a shot in one of the lanes to which he is headed, and then in a long shot we see him through a small archway collapse at the top of the steps. This is a very effective piece of internal framing, pinpointing from a distance the act itself rather than the victim of the act. There follows a short narrative sequence showing Harihar being helped home and then being visited by the doctor. There are some brief shots of him lying on his bed and a high shot of the city at dawn. Harihar then expresses his distress and Sarbajaya, realising that the end is near, sends Apu to fetch some Ganges water. The boy returns in time for the faithful wife to pour the holy water into her husband's mouth. His head falls back and there is an abrupt—indeed, startling—cut to a flock of pigeons suddenly taking flight from the ghat, soaring and circling in the sky. For originality and superb artistry the shot surpasses even the wail of the shehnai to inform Harihar of the death of Durga in *Pather Panchali*.

At the core of *Aparajita* is the bond between mother and son. Thus it is significant that Sarbajaya's opening lines express her concern for Apu. There is also a pointed irony in her worry that there is no school for him close to where they live, for it is education that will act as a wedge between mother and son later in the film. Despite her petty grumbling about their new circumstances, it is clear that they are much better off than they were in Nishchindipur. While they have to share a house with other tenants, it is a house that is not in need of urgent repair to keep it standing. She is able to offer Harihar a share in the luxury of the milk she has set aside for Apu, and Harihar sets off to the market to buy on account whatever they need. Sarbajaya is now enjoying the occasional *pan*[14] and Apu is having the

[14] Betel leaf and nuts, with lime and spices.

sweets that he and Durga had once longed for but were unable to buy. Indeed, there is a moment—when the friend Harihar brings home praises the tea Sarbajaya has made for them—when she actually smiles.

There are two somewhat supernumerary characters in the Benares section of the film. The friend Harihar brings home is a fellow Bengali Brahman who also pursues his religious vocation by the river. He is a happy man, spontaneously friendly to Harihar and kind to Apu, yet his longing for a wife so that he might experience the joys of family life lends a touch of pathos to him. Not at all pleasant, however, is Nanda, a sleazy character who lives alone in a room on the roof. In need of matches Sarbajaya sends Apu to him to borrow a couple of sticks. Apu's point-of-view shot is internally framed by the doorway to the small room, presenting Nanda with his back to the camera as he unwraps a bottle of liquor. He explains to Apu that it is medicine prescribed by his doctor, and he is almost effusive in offering a box of matches for Sarbajaya. However, his unpleasantness is suggested as he watches outside the window the doctor's visit to Harihar, all the while cleaning his teeth, while not long after, his insidiousness is revealed. The camera focuses on a pair of legs with shod feet coming down the stairs; one foot is extended to move a couple of kittens playing on the bottom step. The camera moves back to show Nanda observing through the bedroom window that Harihar is sleeping. We see him remove his shoes and move stealthily to the kitchen. Sarbajaya's suspicion is not far from the mark and she grabs the *banti*[15] and wields it to deter him from further advance. The episode is a simple indication of the vulnerability of a widow living alone with her young son.

The Benares section reaches a logical climax in the death of Harihar. There follows a brief interlude during which Sarbajaya

[15] A large curved kitchen knife attached to a wooden stand.

tries to discern her new directions. She receives a comforting visit from an uncle who invites her to go to his house in the village in Bengal where she apparently once lived before her marriage. She cannot immediately decide as she is employed as a cook in the home of a wealthy family who, it would seem, are very good to her and would like her to go with them when they move to Diwanpur. There is a sequence of shots, with minimal dialogue, in the splendid home: Sarbajaya cooking and Apu picking lice from the head of the dozing master. It is a little later when she catches sight of Apu preparing the master's hookah that she realises what the future would hold for him if she remained in their service. A train whistle is heard over, heralding the cut to the interior of a train, this time moving across the frame from right to left, crossing the river and going on through a range of changing scenery, with day turning into night and night again into day. A snatch of the signature flute motif from *Pather Panchali* suggests a return to a Bengali village and brings a faint hint of a smile to Sarbajaya's face. And so, as we saw a bullock dray moving to the right of the frame at the end of *Pather Panchali*, we now see one moving to the left of the frame, followed by a shot of Sarbajaya, her uncle and Apu coming along the narrow path beside the pond to their new home.

At this stage it would seem that Apu's future has been determined for him. His father was a priestly Brahman, as is the uncle in whose home he has now come to live. The uncle has to go away within a week and requires someone to look after his local duties. He informs Apu that as from tomorrow he will teach him the various rituals he will need to know. A close shot of Apu shows him caught unawares by his uncle's announcement; his big eyes widen and he slowly turns his head to his mother for reassurance. Her smile is intended to give him heart, but it also reflects her pride in him as well as her joy in her new home with her beloved son on the way to being her bread-winner through the noblest of professions. Subsequent shots show the

incongruity of a little boy draped in ritual cloth doing mysterious things with leaves and water and fire and making profound utterances in a language he does not understand. What Ray brings out so beautifully in the shots of Apu in his priestly attire going about his rounds with his tray of ritual elements is the little boy's loneliness. A shot of him watching the rough and tumble of a group of boys at play, smiling as he vicariously enjoys their fun, and another of him watching wistfully as the boys go into the local school, poignantly underline this loneliness. That night he tells his mother that he wants to go to school. To please her, he offers a compromise: he will continue his priestly commitments in his time out of school.

We may well wonder at the appropriateness for Apu of a priestly vocation, certainly while he is still so young. We may also wonder if an education will militate against that vocation. Three pictures from his Benares days may seem to be worth thinking about here. The first is of Apu watching his father at work at the ghat. He is not really interested in what his father does for a living; as is far more natural for a little boy, he is more readily inclined to explore the ghat. The second picture is of him intrigued by the workings of a water system, while his father lies dying. The third sees him respond automatically to his mother's direction to go to the river to get some holy water for his father who is about to die; having filled the brass pot from the river, he is momentarily distracted by the club-swingers' heavy implements sitting beside the water. All of these pictures suggest a little boy with a mind of his own. Education will do amazing things for that mind, and the priestly life will be as remote from him as fame and fortune were from his father.

We are introduced to Apurba Roy's schooldays by a delightful sequence in which the principal of the local school anxiously awaits a visit from the inspector. The headmaster is dressed in fully buttoned up jacket, dhoti, leather shoes and socks. We are offered an amusing moment when he notices some unflattering

graffiti on the wall, and another when he shoos a cow from the school compound. The inspector arrives in a horse-drawn carriage and is dressed quite like a sahib in a white suit and pith helmet; he is greeted by an effusive headmaster and the same cow who had been turned away a little earlier.

The episode is, cinematically, a very pleasant one in its own right, but it also provides the opportunity to focus on Apu the scholar and to discern the direction which the film would now seem to be taking. The headmaster and the inspector enter Apu's Bengali class, in which the boys are studying from the text *Kishalay*. The inspector asks one boy to explain the meaning of the word, *kishalay*. He cannot, and the inspector passes the question on to Apu, who correctly defines it as 'young and tender leaves'. The inspector then turns in the book to Satyendranath Dutta's famous poem, *Bangladesh*,[16] and asks Apu to read it; he does so with fluency and considerable sensitivity. The inspector is much impressed and the headmaster's chest swells with pride. There is a cut to the headmaster's office, and a little later we see Apu going home laden with books on explorers, scientists and the opening up of Africa. In themselves the subjects may or may not be interesting; what is significant is that they reflect a spirit of enquiry and an out-going vision. The subsequent scenes show the profound effect his reading has on Apu as he experiments with the flow of water and dresses up as an African warrior. There is a touching scene in which he tries to explain some elementary astronomy and the nature of an eclipse to his mother; it is sadly clear that they are poles apart.

Apu burns much midnight oil, and in time an older Apu, played by a new actor,[17] is congratulated by the headmaster on coming second in the district and winning a scholarship that

[16] Bengal. The modern nation of Bangladesh comprises only the eastern part of what was traditionally known by that name.

[17] Pinaki Sen plays the young Apu; Smaran Ghosal plays his older counterpart.

will provide him with ten rupees a month should he decide to continue his studies in Calcutta. He presents Apu with a globe of the world, something which becomes a motif of the burgeoning Apu throughout the rest of the film. Interpreters of symbols may go into all manner of detail, but it is enough to suggest that the globe is a sign of Apu's vision and the extent of the freedom to which he aspires. He will not be a priest, nor can a Bengali village contain him any longer.

The news of his success brings no joy to Sarbajaya, for it means the rupturing of their relationship. In fact, Sarbajaya is not well—we have already seen her secretly taking some powder or other—and her health will steadily deteriorate through the remainder of the film. Thus, there is more than one layer of meaning in her protest, "What about me?" Her moment of self-interest is countered by Apu's determination to defend his own. Voices are raised, tempers are heated, and the unthinkable happens—Sarbajaya slaps her beloved son. Apu rushes outside to sulk, and there is an extended shot of the veranda, empty save for the globe and the hurricane lamp. After some time, Sarbajaya emerges from the house seeking the conciliation that will come only by relenting and letting him go. Sarbajaya's nobility is paramount here. Apu gets his own way because Sarbajaya, out of love for him, chooses to let him go. Not only does she sacrifice most of her meagre savings to help him on his way, but she also sacrifices him and accepts the pain of loneliness and being without him.

The next morning Sarbajaya packs Apu off, smiling bravely. She watches him go, both of them probably realising that for this moment, at least, the narrow path beside the pond has become a grand highway. Suddenly empty, she turns towards the house and her imminent loneliness. Now her joy is in memory; she can only look back. Apu has all but cut the ties that bind him to his past and he can only look forward. The shots of him on the train show him absorbed in his globe.

With the help of the headmaster Apu comes to share a room with the proprietor of a printing workshop, and for rent he spends some time each night helping with the press. The sign of overdoing things resulting in sudden tiredness seen early in his schooldays is evident again now, but this time with much more serious consequences. Apu incurs the restrained and courteous wrath of a somewhat fusty old professor of English when he starts to nod off during his lecture and is then humiliated in front of the huge class by being ejected from it. Apu acutely feels the shame of this, and his friend, who is also sent out of the lecture, finds him in tears. Apu, who has never been shy of work, now has to learn that despite his best intentions it is not always possible to swim with the tide. It is a well constructed little episode, involving a museum piece of a lecturer expatiating on the quaint topic of metonymy and synecdoche and using the latter to explain Apu's grave offence. It also invites sympathy from the viewer who understands fully the strain under which Apu lives.

Calcutta represents the opening up of a new world for Apu. As soon as he steps off the train at Sealdah Station he is caught up in the pace of urban life as he is pushed and buffeted by the milling crowd. When he comes to Patuatala Lane off Harrison Road, he is startled by a motor-car blaring its horn as it speeds past him. These are simple, economic signs of movement and modernity, enhancing Apu's own sense of progress that was initiated in his first sight of a train in the *kash* field in *Pather Panchali*. When Apu first enters the room that will be his home in Calcutta, he is immediately fascinated by the electric light switch. Notions of freedom, aspiration and worlds beyond worlds are entertained when the two friends, having been sent out of their English class, find themselves on the bank of the Hooghly watching the ships and dreaming aloud of faraway places. When pressed by his friend to say whether or not he would go abroad with him, he shrugs and says, "No. Ma wouldn't let me go." In his mind she is a stumbling-block to his complete freedom.

On the other hand, Sarbajaya lives only for the occasional home visit from Apu. A shot of her sitting on a mat outside the house underlines her loneliness. The sound of the train in the distance stirs her into anticipation and soon there is a shot of Apu walking up the path beside the pond, carrying along with his luggage the ever-present globe, as though to remind her that she cannot have him to herself but she must share him with the world. Nevertheless, the mother's joy is boundless.

During their subsequent conversation, she asks him about what he has seen in Calcutta, and among the places he mentions is Keoratala, having to explain to her, with a hint of amusement, that it is a cremation ghat. Sarbajaya noticeably shudders, and is led a little later to confess to him about her illness, asserting that her only hope now lies with him. He is coldly unresponsive. It is clear that now they seem to be on two entirely different planes, suggested earlier in his futile endeavour to explain astronomy to her. This is confirmed the next day when he flatly refuses to visit relatives who are important to Sarbajaya, his need to leave the village having been underlined in a shot showing his obvious indifference to a rustic entertainment. As he turns away from an amazing act by a contortionist, there is a clear suggestion that the village no longer holds any interest for him. At this point we might readily recall the little boy in *Pather Panchali* who ran with such enthusiasm to see the kaleidoscope man.

Determined to leave early the next morning without visiting anyone, Apu packs his things and asks his mother to wake him early. Out of misplaced love for him she lets him sleep. When he wakes up and sees the time he is very angry, so causing Sarbajaya further pain as she tries to be helpful in getting him ready to leave. There is then an interesting turn in the anticipated direction of the narrative. Sarbajaya watches Apu hurry off down the path beside the pond; he reaches the station just in time for the train and buys his ticket. We see him waiting as the train appears in the distance. He gets up, ready to board. He looks

down, pensive. There is then a shot of Sarbajaya, sitting brooding. This is followed by her point-of-view shot of Apu coming back up the path beside the pond. Maybe to atone for his earlier petulance, he smiles warmly at her and assures her that there will be no problem if he defers his return until the next day. The point here is clearly to show that the natural urge of affection for his mother is not yet completely dispelled, and that in his own inner conflict between his work and his love for his mother, his mother is still a force.

The urge of affection will gradually weaken, however. There follows a sequence of shots depicting Apu in his student world—attending lectures, conducting experiments in chemistry and physics—and at work at the press at night. We do not see him playing games or going out to have fun with friends. His life is a demanding one and he is, indeed, committed to its rigours. However, all this means that he must further neglect his mother whom he does not see for two months. With a somewhat callous choice of words he tells his friend that he has 'managed' her by sending her some money. Meanwhile, close shots of Sarbajaya reveal her looking more and more sickly, her face pallid and her eyes sunk in shadows. As her health deteriorates, her main worry is that her niece, Nirupama, will write of her condition to Apu. Of course, that would bring him back to her, but it would also worry him and it might even cause him problems with his work. Her love for him prevents her from following that course. Nirupama does, in fact, send a postcard to Apu, but by then it is too late.

One of the most memorable scenes of the film shows Sarbajaya alone, sitting under a tree as night is falling. The situation, the composition, the lighting all contribute to an ominous atmosphere. There is the ghostly sound of a train's whistle, and then we see an eerie silhouette shot of the train running along the far side of the pond from what we now know is the direction of Calcutta. She thinks she hears Apu calling, "Ma!" She is filled

with hope, though she can barely move. It is a cruel hallucination, and instead of Apu coming along the path, all that there is to be seen is a mass of fireflies perforating the darkness.

Apu wastes no time in getting home. When he gets down from the train and sets off along the path to the house, the camera focuses on his feet to stress his haste; as he nears the house, the camera takes in all of him as he slows down apprehensively. There is a strange sense of oppressiveness as he finds the house empty. He then catches sight of his uncle. There is no call for words. Apu sits under the tree and sobs. There are some rational, comforting words from his uncle, but they are not needed as Apu realises all too well that he cannot bring his mother back. We then see him packing his bundle for his return to Calcutta, the globe prominent. He will not stay to perform his mother's last rites; that is something he can do in Calcutta. He hardly takes his uncle's blessing before turning away to go to the station, leaving the old man internally framed by the gate in the compound wall, contained, as it were, in a world which Apu has renounced.

In fact, Apu at last experiences freedom. It is not appropriate to say that he is free of his mother nor that he is free of her love. Love, however, does imply bonds, and it is the bonds of love from which he is now free. In Bengal, where the cult of the Mother Goddess is strong and mothers are given overt love and adoration, there are many who would condemn Apu for not having looked after his mother as well as he should have. Such a criticism is not entirely unjust. After all, Sarbajaya has suffered so much on behalf of her family, has sacrificed so much for them, that Apu's gratitude might have been a little more evident. Apu, however, is an intelligent boy, but a boy nevertheless; he does not have the maturity to balance the demands of study, his job at the press and his filial obligations. The matter of distance also is significant, and maybe he might have managed a lot

better had home not been so far from Calcutta. But to argue that he should not have left his mother in the first place, responsibly deciding to stay at home and provide for her, presumably as a priest, is to deny worth to the individual. Life can be very cruel in the choices if offers to the young. Perhaps the essence of the poignancy of *Aparajita* lies in the limitations within which Apu may find his freedom.

In *Pather Panchali*, with its distinct spatial integrity, there are no impediments to continuity. The potential difficulty of continuity is somewhat pronounced in *Aparajita* with the considerable variety of setting and the two substantial Apu roles. However, the film runs as smoothly as its predecessor, partly because of the technical expertise in the editing of the film, though mainly due to the pivotal role of Sarbajaya. The character is superbly conceived by Ray, after Bibhutibhushan, and brilliantly sustained by Karuna Banerjee, whose acting in both films is of the highest quality.

Like its predecessor, Ray's second film is steeped in humanism, depicting with immense sympathy the small victories of his ordinary people, the hurdles they confront, their courage, their weaknesses and their vulnerability. Yet it is his mark as a major filmmaker that this humanism is not highlighted in any way, but simply shown. Ray is at his sublime best when the dialogue is minimal and his rare talent for giving eloquence to the camera is set free. Like *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajita* is a visually rich film, in some ways more so given the greater variety of contexts through which it moves. The magnificent shots of Benares bear testimony to the great bulwark of Hindu religious tradition, offered not with comment but as an existential fact. More poetically it may be seen as a vast pond in which Harihar Roy is a very small, insignificant fish. The shots in the grand house of Sarbajaya's employers contrast tellingly with what she has been used to live in. The presentation without context of her uncle's rural home is designed to facilitate the loneliness that will come to dominate

her life in the latter part of the film, an effect that is achieved simply and without recourse to dialogue. Providing a distinct, sometimes jarring contrast to the rural scenes are those set in Calcutta, reflecting in form and mechanics the active, creative, aspirational aspect of Apu's character.

Just as impressive visually is the last film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar* ("The World of Apu", 1959). There is more here of Calcutta than there is in *Aparajita*, although most of it is in Apu's room and its squalid neighbourhood. As a counterpart to the rural scenes in the previous two films there are some beautiful shots of a once grand estate in east Bengal as well as some superb views of the hill region where Apu's travels would seem to end.

As the role of Sarbajaya holds together *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajita*, it is the role of Apu that dominates the final film of the trilogy. The role is simple yet played with much energy, something which might be said to overcompensate for the minimal development of the character. At the opening of the film Apu has come on a little way since the end of *Aparajita* and the death of his mother which rendered him a kind of liberation. In this last stanza of the song of his road we may expect to see the culmination of Apu's journey. Ray, unsurprisingly, will gratify his audience with nothing predictable.

The narrative structure of *Apur Sansar* is less complex than that of *Aparajita* though certainly more formal than that of *Pather Panchali*. There are three broad sections: the first presents Apu enjoying a kind of freedom in Calcutta; the second depicts his relationship with Aparna and is in two sub-sections: one set in Khulna, the other in Calcutta; and the third, making occasional reference to Khulna, deals with Apu at large.

The opening shots stress first of all Apu's poverty, suggesting that at least on the surface there has not been much if any remove from the motif burden of *Pather Panchali*. There is a torn curtain being tossed about in the wind, Apu is wearing a ragged singlet,

and there is an appreciable leak in his roof. A loud whistle tells us that the railway line is very close, as well as substantiating a motif beautifully introduced in *Pather Panchali* and given significance in *Aparajita*. In these less than humble conditions we watch Apu get up from his bed, attend cursorily to the leak and go out onto the roof and rejoice in the pelting rain. A little later, while shaving, Apu is visited by his landlord demanding the three months rent that he owes. Thus, as adjuncts of poverty, debt and the inability to resolve it are seen as features continuing on from *Pather Panchali*. Perhaps the more optimistic members of Ray's audience may have felt that, at the end of *Aparajita*, these features would soon be eradicated for the boy who held the world in his hands, but from the outset of *Apur Sansar* Ray is at pains to make clear that penury and debt are still unavoidable for Apu. Moreover, there is no sign in Apu's small room of the globe that in *Aparajita* symbolised such grand hope.

There is a significant difference, however. The despair that accompanies poverty in Nishchindipur is not at all apparent here, as Apu, amid the material discomforts of his life, exudes joy and, in his conversation with the landlord, displays an even cheeky nonchalance. He is quite buoyant as he selects several of his books to sell and sets about looking for work to supplement the fifteen rupees he gets each month from giving private tuition. His writing, it appears, consumes his energies and requires no monetary payment. In *Aparajita*, even when financial constraints are no longer an issue for Sarbajaya, there is still an absence of joy in her life as long as there is an absence of Apu, and so she remains despondent. Indeed, in *Apur Sansar* financial want will not be a cause of dejection; what will bring Apu to the depths of depression will be a more profound form of poverty.

While he no longer holds the world in his hands, Apu does at least feel that he has found a place in it. Ray's visual presentation of the physical aspect of that place reveals it in its undeniable squalor. The tenement building, on the roof of which Apu has a room, is cramped and crowded and stands beside the

railway line, making life there coloured by the smoke from trains and punctuated by their whistles. Yet Apu is content in this place, as is simply indicated by shots of him sitting on his bed playing his flute. Indeed, there is more to a 'place' in the world than a notion of mere physical location. Apu would have us believe that the freedom that allows contentment with oneself is the key to a feeling of identity, the realisation of a place in the world. Moreover, it would seem that finding this place gives rise to a significant element of self-sufficiency, almost obviating the need for friendship. When Pulu, Apu's friend from his student days, comes to see him, he chides him for being so difficult to find. Evidently Apu is amenable to friendship, but does not feel the need to actively cultivate it.

Apu eloquently expresses his newly enhanced notion of identity when he gives Pulu a brief synopsis of the novel he is writing, a work which is obviously autobiographical, for its central character so closely resembles Apu.

> Through education, through struggle, he overcomes his prejudices and rigidity. He accepts nothing without a rationale . . . He is sensitive . . . Small things move him and please him. Maybe he has great potential, great possibilities, but he does nothing . . . He does nothing great, and remains poor . . . but his life has meaning and joy. He wants to live!

As Apu expresses these ideas for his work, there is heard over the flute playing the familiar and much loved motif theme from *Pather Panchali*, momentarily bringing back to us the small Brahman boy in Nishchindipur, at first living under the wing of his sister, then, for a time, in the footsteps of his father, and always possessed by his mother. Still not free of poverty but certainly free of the despair that it creates, no longer subject to the dictates of tradition nor even to those of modern, rational learning, he is able to speak with conviction about joy and wanting to live. Despair comes when, with the dissipation of joy, the longing to live dwindles. Apu is yet to undergo this awful experience.

(As well as the flute theme over Apu's synopsis of his novel, there is a shot in *Apur Sansar* which readily brings to mind the connection between Apu in Calcutta and Apu in Nishchindipur. There is a long shot, largely silhouetted, of him coming towards his house along the railway line. It is a very clever reminder of those shots in *Pather Panchali* of Apu returning to his humble home, but where the squalor of the industrial city is supplanted by rustic serenity.)

Pulu has, in fact, called on Apu to invite him to give him company on a trip to Khulna to attend the wedding of his cousin. There has already been a reference to marriage, when one of Apu's neighbours bearing the same surname offered him the advice, "Don't get yourself tied up in marriage," an expression of bachelor jocularity that will echo gravely later in the film. Pulu also offers to help Apu get a typing job, but that must wait until after the wedding; thus Pulu, in an endeavour to create an enticing description of rural beauty, tries to persuade Apu to join him. The most immediate effect of this indication of a significant change in setting is to provide something of an antithesis to the industrialised Calcutta in which Apu thinks he has found his place in the world, a change, indeed, great enough in magnitude to match that about to occur in Apu's life. The contrast is enhanced by a cut that more than substantiates Pulu's rhapsodising. The frame is filled with an expanse of sky, the wide river, flowers and crops, and animals grazing. A boat on the river carries Pulu, who is reading the manuscript of Apu's novel, and Apu, who is playing his flute. There are then shots of the wedding preparations in the big house of Pulu's relatives. Apu is received with warm affability, especially by Pulu's aunt, the mother of the bride, who compares him, in rather typical Bengali hyperbole, with the Lord Krishna himself.[18]

[18] The god Krishna, very popular in Bengal, is characteristically depicted in myth and in conventional iconography playing the flute.

With the arrival of the groom's party, Ray takes us on a further step in the geographical contrast and provides with consummate ease a remarkable distinction between urban modernity and provincial traditionalism.[19] There is a long shot of a party of men accompanying a palanquin, moving across the frame from left to right, the river on their left and, up on a rise to their right, a somnolent Apu with flute and book. The procession is preceded by an incongruously uniformed band playing a repetitive and not entirely in-tune version of *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow.* While Apu quite easily ignores this rustic ingenuousness, it does offer an element of amusement, at least until the camera brings us a close-up of the groom inside the palanquin; in his fine white clothes and traditional conical headdress he looks quite the part, except for the fact that he appears quite obviously troubled. With this element of amusement, in its lush and lovely setting, Ray has heightened the spirits of his audience, only to cause them to drop with a most unexpected revelation that the groom is mad. This sad and appalling fact—sad to the audience and appalling to the bride's family—is not laboured by Ray, a seemingly epileptic fit and a simple indication of intellectual retardation being sufficient to make this social disaster credible.

Having made his narrative swell slightly only to subside, Ray now lets it soar, only to have it plummet tragically somewhat later. First it must be understood that the marriage of Pulu's cousin Aparna had been arranged, and then determined to be celebrated at a particular time of day according to astrological direction; should the time pass without being exploited, she must remain unmarried for the rest of her life and so incur for

[19] Ray had dealt brilliantly with rural traditionalism in his previous film, *Jalsaghar* (1958) and would treat it as effectively again in the first two sections of *Tin Kanya* (1961). He would handle the conflict between tradition and modernity with masterly perception and exposition in *Devi* (1960), which immediately followed *Apur Sansar.*

herself and her family the social opprobrium that attaches to a woman not involved in this most basic of social contracts. Yet to allow her to marry a perceived lunatic would be unthinkably inhumane on the part of her father. A way out has to be found, and so Pulu solicitously approaches Apu. Of course, it may be assumed that Apu will have to marry sooner or later, and without a family to arrange a bride for him his abiding by this social convention might be very difficult. Nevertheless, coming quite out of the blue as Pulu's request does, Apu's immediate reaction is to indignantly refuse and to stick to his guns long enough for Pulu to retreat, disheartened.

Economical as ever, Ray offers a brief sequence visually representing Apu's second thoughts and eventual change of mind. Ray is not interested in logic in this particular situation; it is highly subjective for Apu, and therefore impressionism is sufficient to the task of telling us that Apu thinks, rather than *what* he thinks. There is a beautiful long shot embracing a vast stretch of sky, the river and the old house, now falling into decay but still suggesting something of its former splendour; Apu intrudes lightly into the bottom left of the frame, just enough to associate him with this grand vista. There is then a cut to a medium shot of Apu, looking towards the house. There follows a cut to the groom's party in retreat. There is a cut back to Apu, flute and book in hand, alone and pensive on the river bank as they pass by. The final cut is to the group of benumbed and despondent men in the courtyard; Apu calls to Pulu and the agreement is obliquely made. The marriage is celebrated, and what may well seem obvious is expressed by the two elderly women: "The curse has turned into a blessing. God has favoured your daughter!" to which the mother of the bride replies, "It is more than a blessing."

There is a cut to a brief shot of the river, and then the camera reveals the newlyweds alone in the bridal chamber. The song of a distant boatman wafts through the night and is heard in the

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background. In this extraordinarily ornate situation, the two young people still in bridal array and their room heavily decorated, Apu sees the need for candour. He tells Aparna that he has no family, and confesses to her his poverty and his lack of prospects, though he speaks with some enthusiasm about his writing. There is an apologetic tone to his words, and he gives her the right to remain with her family and let him return to Calcutta. It is all brief and straight to the point; even more brief, yet just as meaningful, is Aparna's smile of acceptance of her husband. And so begins a truly beautiful relationship, quite without sentimentality and with a very pure love transcending the need for any element of what, in Hollywood or Bombay, would be romance.

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Yet there is something ever so slightly ominous about the cut. Just as a striking contrast was effected by the earlier cut from Calcutta to Khulna, so the cut in reverse displays a similar distinction. Ray is careful, however, not to let the change from bucolic serenity to industrial squalor be deflating, for what follows is a special loveliness of the couple's own making, abundantly enhanced by a degree of humour that stems from the ebullience that their happiness in one another creates. First, however, he establishes the context of Aparna's descent in material comfort.

The cut from the bridal chamber is to the rooftops of Calcutta. There is then a high shot following a carriage through Apu's bleak neighbourhood beside the railway line. At the house the two young people, still in their wedding attire, she carrying his ornamental conical headdress, enter tentatively and carefully ascend the stairs, Aparna's eyes all the time demurely cast down. They enter Apu's room on the roof, infinitely smaller than any room in the grand house in Khulna, and Aparna takes in the cramped little space and the torn curtains and, outside, the smoke and the noise of the trains. When Apu goes downstairs to bring up the rest of the luggage, she cries as the reality of having left her home of so many years sinks in. This poignant

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moment is shown by the camera concentrating on the left side of her face through a large hole in the tattered curtain. Significantly she is shown to recover herself in a point of view shot of a woman and a small child down in the yard. Moments later we see Apu presenting his new bride to the neighbours, and Aparna is instantly admired and accepted. That there will be no more tears of homesickness is suggested by the cut, a little later, to the inside of the room on the roof, showing off the new curtain and what might be described as a woman's touch.

Ray chooses to depict the happiness of the marriage impressionistically, so highlighting the emotional aspect of the relationship without its getting diluted or sidelined in narrative substance. There are some truly beautiful shots of love, and quite without recourse to the Western necessities of embracing and kissing. We see Aparna get up from the bed in the morning only to find that she has been tied by the end of her sari to her husband; it is a shot evoking humour as well as a simple and touching symbolism. She readily does the things that a team of servants would have done in the grand house in Khulna—breaking coal, starting a fire, heating water—and his eyes follow her lovingly around. There is a fleeting suggestion of sexual inequality as Apu is seen playing his flute while Aparna kills a cockroach, but another shot sees him being brought to heel as he takes a cigarette and reads a note in her handwriting inside the packet reminding him of his promise to ration his smoking. To reinforce the equality in their relationship there is a shot of Apu sitting on the floor, eating his meal, Aparna behind him fanning him; the shot very simply dissolves into reverse, with Aparna eating while Apu fans her from behind. It is one of the most memorably lovely shots in all of Ray's films. There are delightful moments in which she playfully teases him and of Apu's endeavours to teach her English. Ray the realist does not try, however, to depict it all as idyllic. There are still the piercing squeals of the train whistles, the smoke of the coal fire and the

smoke from the trains in the background. There is a poignant big close shot of their faces, Aparna's chin resting on Apu's shoulder; Apu is concerned for her comfort and wants to engage a servant, while Aparna gently points out that that would only make her unhappy, for then he would have to work longer hours to pay for the servant and she, therefore, would see so much less of him. What is important is the fact that, according to Apu's philosophy expressed earlier to Pulu, they can transcend the apparent drawbacks and still find joy in their life together.

The joy must endure a pause in order that a greater joy be received. Aparna is pregnant and, as is customary among Bengali women, will spend the last two months of her pregnancy in her familial home. There is a brief scene in which the two of them are in a cinema house watching a lurid mythological film. After a few moments the screen in the scene dissolves into the back window of a carriage, and we see Apu and Aparna being driven home. She chides him for the expense of such a luxury, but the emphasis is on her impending absence. He declares her importance to him in terms of his creativity: "My writing's important to me, but you're more important. . . I'll dedicate the novel to you." Later these words will echo in a poignant irony. Then she lights his cigarette for him, and the flame of the match illuminates her beautiful face. He asks, "What gives light to your eyes?" She replies, "Kajal." *Kajal* means collyrium, used as an eye make-up, but it is also a boy's name and will be the name given to their child. It is a brief scene, but dense with meaning.

The scene at the station when Aparna, accompanied by her brother, leaves for Khulna, has little if any potential for originality. Ray therefore keeps it brief, indicating simply the event of departure and the sadness appropriate to a temporary parting of two people very much in love. He deliberately, and effectively, avoids the cliché of having Apu run along the platform as the train moves out, frantically offering his final words of farewell. In fact, as the train starts to move, Apu walks sadly towards the

camera as the train moves in the opposite direction. Such a composition serves to make more acute the emotional fracture, and the audience may even feel a sense of foreboding in the direction the narrative might be seen to be taking.

There is happiness in the short scenes which follow, even though Aparna is present only in the letters which Apu lives for. We see him returning home from work, coming down from the road onto the railway line; the environment is as grim as ever, yet there is a spring in Apu's heel for he has Aparna's letter in his pocket. The father-to-be bends down and picks up a child from the line and sets it in a safe place, then goes up to his room. There follows an extraordinarily powerful scene when Apu sees his brother-in-law waiting for him against the balustrade of the roof. Clearly, the buoyancy of Apu's mood is to be deflated. The young man's face says everything, even the muttered words, 'Aparna . . . during childbirth,' are superfluous. Apu's shock is profound; with this sudden loss of his senses all he can do is shoot the messenger, throwing a particularly cruel punch at his hapless brother-in-law. Now the audience must wonder at the cruelty of fate that this lovely marriage, begun so adventitiously, should end apparently so capriciously.

This utterly irrational punch marks a turning-point in the film—indeed, in the trilogy—for not only does it set the course of the narrative in its next direction, but it presents the Apu we have known for so long now in a new light. In *Aparajita* we have seen evidence of Apu being indifferent to the interests or the suffering of others, including his own mother, even to the point of callousness. In the opening section of *Apur Sansar* his quest for freedom is still self-centred (though not necessarily selfish). So far, however, there has been no indication of a violent Apu, but this small act of cruelty proclaims a negative and potentially self-destructive phase in Apu's life.

This last section begins in Khulna—presumably Apu had gone there for the funereal formalities. He is unshaven, in

deference to ritual convention, and he says nothing; indeed, he can barely get up from his bed. His mother-in-law chides him for his moroseness with common-sense optimism: "At least the child is alive. . . In life there are both blessings and sorrows . . . You can marry again ten times over." Apu, however, has no intention of bringing himself out of his grief. There is a fade to a low shot of the railway line back in Calcutta; a train's whistle is heard. We see Apu, grim and pensive, looking down on the line. There is then a shot of nothing—just the empty sky—lasting for a few seconds, followed by a close-up of Apu's face. A scream breaks his morbid reverie; a pig has been killed by a train. Apu's interest in suicide passes.

From the contemplation of suicide Apu's introspection turns to travel—"I don't know where"—for release from the bonds of grief. There is a shot of a train, then we see Apu inside it. There is then a cut to a baby in a cradle, an aspect of Apu's actuality beyond himself that must and will persist. There is another cut to waves breaking on some shore. We see Apu on the beach, his beard now longer, and then in a forest, his beard longer still. Apu is now visually far removed from the fresh-faced young man who once inadvertently evoked the god Krishna to his mother-in-law. Finally, we see him sitting atop a hill, watching the sun fall behind another hill on the other side of a valley. He takes from his bag the manuscript of his novel, and slowly and deliberately tosses the pages to the elements, so shedding his life as he has known it. We remember that the novel was autobiographical, and that he had wanted to dedicate it to Aparna. She is no more, and yet he does more than dedicate his novel to her: he offers her—now at one with the elements—what has been his life. It is a grand gesture in releasing himself from previous ties, but he will never be able to truly move on as long as one other tie continues to bind. From the top of the hill there is a cut to the now established shot of the old house beside the river in Khulna.

The baby Kajal has grown into a spirited and mischievous boy of five and, now that his grandmother is dead, too much for his ageing grandfather to handle. The little boy, like his father, is a restless spirit, but his father, of whom he dreams and for whom he longs, has not been to see him in five years. The only connection maintained by the father is in sending money for his upkeep. Having learned all this from his uncle, Pulu, now returned from abroad, sets out to look for Apu.

The confrontation between the two old friends has Kajal as its focus. Ray sets the scene in hill country, where the openness suggests the freedom that Apu seeks, yet Pulu is there obviously to place an obstacle in the way of that quest. His argument is simple, appealing to the emotions that a father would normally feel for his child, but Apu frankly denies those feelings:

> How can I have feelings for him? I've not even seen him. He's unreal to me. Unreal. He doesn't even exist for me.

Apu's obvious uneasiness suggests that he is rationalising and struggling with both his mind and his feelings. A little later he comes to the core of the problem.

> There's something I can never forget. It is because Kajal is alive that Aparna is not.

Unable to persuade Apu to return, Pulu leaves, but Apu is clearly agitated, even to the point of distress. Soon after, his second thoughts turn him to Khulna, intending to go abroad after placing the boy with someone in his native village.

We may well have wondered how far the callousness of Apu, following on from that anomalous yet significant punch, may go. In an exquisitely unhurried sequence of shots, Ray depicts the melting of a cold heart as he shows Apu looking at his little boy, asleep on the bed. A similar sounding boatman's song to that which floated in the background on the night of Apu's marriage is now heard wafting from the distance as Apu gazes

on the product of that beautiful union. Apu sits in thought beside the window looking out onto the river, the song all the while continuing. He goes back to stand beside the bed, then lays his hand on the boy's forehead. The boy wakes up, sees a stranger, and runs from the room. Outside, Apu appeals to the boy, "I'm your father," prompting the response of a stone thrown by Kajal. The grandfather's reaction is to raise his stick to the boy, but Apu, alarmed, stops him in an instinctive gesture of paternal protection. Apu continues to try to win the boy's trust with toys and stories, but the child remains sceptical. Eventually, there is a shot of Apu walking away from the house, alone. He looks back to see Kajal watching him. He goes on, turns again, and notices that the boy is following him. Kajal tells him that he will go with him only if he will take him to his father in Calcutta. "Who are you?" the boy asks. "I am . . . your friend," Apu replies, readily assuming a new identity as he takes up a new reason to want to live. The final shot is of Apu walking towards the camera, away from the old house and his father-in-law, with his son on his shoulders. Joy has returned to Apu's face.

The ending of the odyssey of Apu is probably not the one most of us would have written. There are numerous possibilities, all of them predictable. Ray's happy ending is by no means foreseeable and yet is very credibly arrived at and philosophically appropriate to the Apu he has developed over three films. It is interesting to see how Apu had maintained a stoicism in the face of the various deaths throughout the trilogy—Indir Thakrun's, Durga's, his father's and even his mother's (he cries, but after that mourns no further)—yet with the death of his wife, whom he had known for far less time than any of the others whose passing he had suffered, he was proven totally vulnerable and was for a long time quite unable to adjust to it. This, after all, was the relationship that gave him the freedom to grow in love, not to be protected, directed or stifled in it. His

inability to accept Aparna's death is at once a testimony of the depth of his love for her and reason for his callous disregard of their child. Nevertheless, the neglect of Kajal might be rationalised by him, but never, in his heart, justified. Unless Apu were to be seen ultimately as some kind of monster, he had to effect a reconcilement. The fact that he is able to do it as a father in fact and as a friend in effect makes the rapprochement so much more creative, offering to the boy, especially, a freedom to grow that Apu's own childhood had lacked. The film reaches finality in that Apu and Kajal are brought together, but it is also open-ended in that there is no suggestion of where they are going. What is sufficient is the knowledge that hope and joy prevail, that the gloom that pervaded so much of *Pather Panchali* and which was, to a large extent, worked through in *Aparajita,* has now been dispelled. The ending represents, indeed, Apu's achievement.

One of the memorable insights into childhood that Ray offers us in *Pather Panchali* is in the scene in which Durga takes Apu to the railway line where the two of them are overawed by their first sight of a train. We do not know what goes on in Apu's mind after seeing the monstrous iron horse, flying across the landscape and gushing out its filthy black smoke into the clean blue sky, but thereafter, for one reason and another, change becomes a feature of Apu's life. The train is a convenient agent of change and, hence, a ready symbol of progress and modernity. Although the family are seen at the end of *Pather Panchali* leaving Nishchindipur by bullock cart, at the beginning of *Aparajita* they arrive in Benares by train. Sarbajaya and Apu's symmetrically depicted departure from Benares is also by train, and it is the train that helps Apu to minimise the distance between his studies in Calcutta and his mother in the village. It is the train that Sarbajaya poignantly waits for in her last days, longing for her son to come back to her. Apart from the rain, the first sound to be heard in *Apur Sansar* is that of a

train's whistle. Apu lives in a house beside a railway line, and the frequent piercing whistles and the dirty black smoke of this wondrous agent of progress dominate his domestic environment. It is a train that brings him and his new bride to their home in Calcutta and it is a train that ultimately takes her from him. It is the destructive power of the train to which his disturbed mind defers in his contemplation of suicide. The train is an underlying reminder throughout the trilogy that Apu lives in a world of constant change, a fact enunciated so famously by the Buddha and yet hardly applicable to the world of Nishchindipur. As the trilogy progresses and Apu grapples with the vicissitudes of life, trains become more frequent on Ray's screen.

We might also note that throughout the trilogy there are various notions of possession. In *Pather Panchali* deprivation is more common, yet it does enhance the desire for possession. With Apu and Durga the desire usually is directed towards food—stolen fruit, a nefariously concocted mango pickle, sweets—but also has as its object money for such things as the kaleidoscope show. Durga values greatly her small box of insignificant trinkets, and is moved to anger when Apu violates it to make himself up in a *jatra* performance of his own. The urge to possess reaches a pathetic urgency in Durga's theft of Tunu's beads. Sarbajaya demonstrates a mother's natural possessiveness of her children in both *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajita*. It is in *Aparajita* and *Apur Sansar* that we see Apu drawn into a realm of delusion by the urge to possess. In *Aparajita* he would hold the world in his hands, and yet experience will soon tell him that the world is a hard and often cruel place, and that to hold dominion over even a small part of it requires means that are far beyond him. In *Apur Sansar* he appears to have learnt that lesson and has found contentment in joy, something for which money and academic qualifications are not required. The flute is an easy symbol of joy, yet just as delusory as the globe in *Aparajita*. Ultimately Apu will learn the classical Indian lesson taught by

both Hindu and Buddhist sages that the desire for anything, especially possession, culminates only in sorrow, not in joy. Thus, Apu's contentment in calling himself Kajal's friend rather than father minimises any urge to possess and so augurs well for his happiness.

The Apu trilogy is perhaps the greatest achievement yet in all Indian cinema. We might note the material difficulties bordering on impossibilities under which much of the work was undertaken, and the relative inexperience of director, cast and crew.[20] It is also worth noting that Satyajit Ray produced such excellent work at the outset of his career.[21] However, all this is beside the essential point that, simply as a work of art, the trilogy is a monumental accomplishment. With these three films Ray set standards of cinema that even he would often have difficulty in emulating. The trilogy had a profound effect—in the realm of the art cinema, at least—on the development of realistic acting, on script and camera economy and on the presentation of meaningful content. After the release of his fifth film, Ray's standing as a filmmaker was unconditionally prominent.

[20] See Satyajit Ray, *My Years with Apu*, Penguin India, 1994.

[21] Other directors too have produced works of remarkably high standard at the outset of their careers, such as Shyam Benegal with *Ankur* and *Nishant* and Ketan Mehta with *Bhavni Bhavai.*

3 An Early Pastiche: *Parash Pathar, Jalsaghar, Abhijan, Kapurush O Mahapurush, Chidiakhana*

The first two films of the Apu trilogy met with international acclaim, particularly at Cannes and Venice. In the year before completing the trilogy with *Apur Sansar* Ray made two films, in so many ways different from each other as they are from their Apu predecessors. *Parash Pathar* ("The Philosopher's Stone") is a comic fable while *Jalsaghar* ("The Music Room") is an examination of social change. The quest for something different continued to lure Ray in the sixties. While he found something of an anchor for his creativity in Tagore,[1] made a superb film in *Devi* and, with great competence directed his attention toward urban middle-class issues,[2] he would hit and miss with *Abhijan* ("The Expedition", 1962) and *Kapurush O Mahapurush* ("The Coward and the Holy Man", 1965). His first attempt at a detective story, *Chidiakhana* ("The Zoo", 1967) fails on most

[1] See Chapter 6.
[2] See Chapter 4.

counts. His first twelve films are indeed a mixed bag ranging from brilliant to mediocre. With the exception of *Jalsaghar*, this chapter focuses on the mediocre.

Parash Pathar is one of Ray's minor films, but it is an archival gem nevertheless. It will always be valued as evidence of the remarkable talent of the great comic actor, Tulsi Chakravarti, as well as a souvenir of the Calcutta of the late 1950s. The first twenty-five minutes of the film are exquisite cinema; thereafter the film loses its intensity and its economy in extenuation and repetition, despite the best efforts of Chakravarti.

The film opens with a variety of shots of Dalhousie Square, the centre of Calcutta's business district.[3] It is the end of the working day and crowds are busily heading home. The slight acceleration of camera speed quaintly underlines the notion of hustle and bustle, but it is strikingly obvious that the Calcutta of 1958 was not at all as crowded as the city today. The camera then takes us inside a building and a voice-over introduces us to Paresh Chandra Dutt, the film's main character, waiting for a lift. As soon as the lift arrives an apparently senior colleague appears on the scene and Paresh and his companion stand back in deference, so allowing several other people as well to board the lift, which then goes on down without Paresh and his friend. Thus, in a brief, mildly comic sequence it is made obvious that we are dealing with a man of little importance.

There is a delightful sequence as Paresh walks along Old Courthouse Street, from the right of the frame to the left; the camera would seem to be stationed on the other side of the road, keeping him in long shot. For a bulky man his mincing gait is amusing, as is his seeming panic about the imminence of rain; he looks about and above for raindrops, as someone who

[3] It was renamed Badal-Binoy-Dinesh Bagh, popularly shortened to BBD Bagh, after three young freedom fighters, but as is the case with many of Calcutta's streets, the pre-Independence name somehow seems to persist.

has committed some misdemeanour might urgently look about to see if he is being followed. He passes the Raj Bhavan and reaches the intersection just opposite Curzon Park. There is then a high long shot of Paresh crossing the road as the rain starts to come down heavily. His earlier apprehensiveness has been vindicated and he heads for shelter—with many others—in a monument in the park. It is here that his life changes. Sitting gloomily waiting for the rain to stop, he notices beside him on the plinth a small stone ball. It might seem quite extraordinary that he should pick it up and put it in his pocket, but when he gets home he will offer it to Paltu, a small boy across the lane, who might add it to his collection of marbles.

So far Paresh has presented himself as an endearing character—a man of little significance in the world of commerce but one whose heart is soft enough to think of the interests of a neighbour's boy. When he enters his lane he goes straight to Paltu's window. First he tests him to see if he can remember a nonsense rhyme he had taught him the day before about a green and yellow orang-utan gallivanting about the town and witnessing something quite astounding: a sign advertising job vacancies. The suggestion that Paresh sees an element of black comedy in this reflects his realisation of the precariousness of his own situation; indeed, a little later he will be issued with a retrenchment notice.[4] Paltu passes his test and Paresh presents him with his new 'marble'. Some time later Paltu comes to him to show how, when he hits one of his tin soldiers with the new stone, the tin turns to gold. Aghast and trembling Paresh dares to mouth the words 'philosopher's stone', the greatest possession of the alchemist, for it will turn all lesser metals into gold. There then follows an amusing sequence in which Paresh tries to get the stone back from the boy—obviously it is of much

[4] This concern with unemployment inadvertently augurs the films of the Calcutta Triptych. See Chapter 5.

greater use to him than to Paltu—and manages to do this only with a generous bribe of sweets and a toy pistol.

Some of the most memorable moments of Tulsi Chakravarti's performance are those depicting Paresh's painful coming to terms with possession of the stone. His alternation of delight and tremulousness as he tries to bring himself to actually test the stone eventually brings about a hilariously tearful submission to the fact that he holds in his hand something more powerful than he might ever have imagined and is totally overwhelmed by its potential. His wife certainly does not share his anxiety, although later on her enthusiasm for wealth will wane, her one big desire in life being to go on a pilgrimage to some of India's holy places. However, the poor man's quandary in suddenly becoming rich—a concern not so much for what people may think but what they may suspect—is something Paresh sees all too clearly. Again, when he visits a gold dealer to sell the odds and ends he has turned from lesser metals into gold, his face and his nervous verbosity in trying to 'act natural' reflect the art of a master comic actor. There are a few more funny moments as he goes home in a taxi, a very wealthy man dreaming of honour and recognition, but this is the first of what will be quite a number of overlong sequences that run thin on the paucity of their substance. The taxi passes a new building in the process of construction and consisting only of its vast iron frame, a shot that allows an amusing fantasy for the audience, as does the vast scrap metal yard at which Paresh has the taxi stop. A sequence in which Paresh collects a couple of small iron balls allegedly used as ordnance during the 1857 Mutiny has its comic value severely diluted by being stretched out well after its usefulness has expired. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the film also warrants the criticism of being extenuated and meagre in substance.

Nevertheless, Ray presents Paresh's transition from penury to opulence with notable economy. The camera will not return to

the small and humble home down a lane in the crowded city. We now see Paresh returning in a chauffeur-driven car to a luxurious and spacious two-storey home in a fashionable suburb. As an indication of his new lifestyle, his secretary reminds him that in the last three months Paresh has sponsored thirteen charity functions, attended seven prize-giving ceremonies, been the chief guest at twenty-six functions and performed the laying of three foundation stones. To underline the altruism of the newly rich Paresh Chandra Dutt the secretary reminds him of his unrestrained generosity in giving to so many organisations. The important point being made here is that although Paresh has obtained his wealth in a way that is not actually commendable—as is the case with, for example, those who have inherited fortunes or had luck on the stock exchange or at the race-course—his concern for the well-being of others is prominent in the manner in which he chooses to spend his money.

An invitation to a cocktail party proves to be Paresh's undoing. His humble and abstemious background might be thought to make it unlikely that he would accept an invitation to such a function at all, let alone do so with alacrity. However, given the extraordinary improbability of the change in his life, his acceptance of the invitation should come as no real surprise, nor should the fact that, at the party, he accepts alcohol. Moreover, in the light of his recently illustrated high public profile it is strange that no one at the party seems to know or to have heard of him. It is in this context, coloured by his evident social ineptness, that he launches his first—and probably last—experiment with alcohol. The more he drinks the more foolishly he behaves, although the same can be said of a number of the other guests too. Some of this is quite funny, but again the scene goes on with too much of the same and the comedy wears thin. Eventually Paresh is asked to leave (although the other foolishly behaved guests are allowed to remain) and it is here that he stupidly elects to stand on what dignity he imagines he

still has. Like a schoolboy showing off what he can do in order to impress others, Paresh produces the stone and demonstrates its power. Needless to say, everyone is suitable impressed, especially the party's host, who comes to Paresh the next day to beg for the 'formula' of the stone. Maybe the secret might have been contained, but Paresh offends the host by offering as the formula the nonsense rhyme about an orang-utan he once had taught to Paltu. The host seeks his revenge and in no time the story is splashed over the front pages of newspapers. In order to shed himself of what has now become an onerous burden, Paresh gives the stone to his secretary, Priyatosh who, amazingly, decides to swallow it. Paresh and his wife flee the house to his brother-in-law in Liluah, soon after which a small force of police comes knocking at Paresh's door. To make sense of this there are shots of a Calcutta swept by 'gold panic' and rocked by a crash in the stock market, all of which, like so much of the film, is drawn out well beyond effectiveness.

As their car breaks down near the Victoria Memorial, Paresh and his wife are soon picked up by the police, taken into their custody and interrogated with a view to likely charges of gold smuggling. The scene in the police station is inter-cut with the scene where Priyatosh is undergoing x-rays to determine the status of the stone. Amazingly, he simply digests the stone, so dispossessing it of its power, and all the gold suddenly turns back to lesser metals, so exonerating Paresh and his wife. As the film ends, the flight to Liluah is resumed in a horse-drawn carriage.

Most of the merit of *Parash Pathar* is confined to the first twenty-five minutes or so. The script here is written with a concern for the dynamics of what might be achieved by the film, a concern which seems to fade later in the piece. There is a delight in the mere establishment of character, particularly that of Paresh but also of his wife and of Paltu; the ever dependable servant, present even in the very last shot of the film, is also

portrayed here with a credibility that will not diminish as the work goes on. Among the few highlights of the second half are the scenes where we catch the servant quickly changing his jacket and hat to suit the kind of service which he is being called upon to render, a comedy technique reminiscent of early Chaplin. Most memorable are many of the visual highpoints of the film, all of wl ich occur in the early part. The shots of Calcutta, particularly of the rain pelting down near Curzon Park, are very evocative; so too are the shots of the alley in which Paresh's house is situated, with the street light reflecting off the rain covered street at night lending a superb touch of atmosphere. Inside Paresh's humble lower middle-class home there is in Bansi Chandragupta's design a strong intimation of what he would produce with such brilliant effect a few years later in *Mahanagar*. Here in Paresh's small flat there must also be a notable contrast with the opulence in which Paresh and his wife come to live after the transformation of their lives by the philosopher's stone. Most notable is the array of calendars and religious pictures on the stained walls, as well as the socially obligatory picture of Subhas Chandra Bose, the most popular of the nationalist leaders among the Bengalis. Of overriding atmospheric effect is the general clutter, made more intense by the night lighting.

The film falls short of excellence, however, because of the flaccidity of its form after such a promising start. Nothing momentous happens in the first half hour, but the film nevertheless moves along with no lack of vigour; after that, the pace slackens and the various scenes become unnecessarily prolonged. Scenes which might have been quite funny fall flat for want of sharpness in the writing. Particularly we might note the two scenes in which Priyatosh, the secretary, is alone in the office, sitting back in his chair, his feet up on the desk, chatting to his girlfriend. The purpose of these scenes is not clear. If it is to show Priyatosh as something of a climber, the effect is lost in the dilution of spontaneity; if it is to allow a cameo of comic

acting by Kali Banerjee, who plays Priyatosh, the effect is lost in the need for a clearer idea of what is being said on the other end of the phone. We might note also the alternation of the scene in the police station where Paresh and his wife are being held for interrogation and the scene in the clinic where Priyatosh is being x-rayed by a clownish caricature of a doctor in order to monitor the progress of the stone. Maybe at this early stage in his career Ray was as yet unaware of the comic potential of precise inter-cutting. Whatever the reason, the syntactical connection between the two fields of action is coincidental rather than marked by a clearly integrated purpose, and so the possibility of comedy falls flat. Nevertheless, despite the want of definition, the scene in the police station is given some touching animation in Paresh's endeavour to defend himself against what are absurd charges by simply illustrating his natural, humble self.

There are some nice moral lessons to be learned from this adult fable about getting rich quick; there is a superb performance by Tulsi Chakravarti; and there is some memorable camera work, especially in the first half hour. However, for want of clear dynamics the film does drag thereafter.

One of the better earlier works of Ray is *Jalsaghar*, a film which in many respects—but certainly not all—matches his best work. *Jalsaghar* has much to recommend it: a simple yet moving story by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, music directed by Vilayat Khan and performed by an array of luminaries of Indian music, and superb acting, including a memorable performance by Chhabi Biswas. Moreover, the work of Ray's own team of cameraman, editor and art director[5] at times even surpasses its own customary excellence.

Tarashankar's story as Ray represents it focuses on the one dominant character, with all the other roles being peripheral to it. Biswambhar Roy is a man imprisoned by his own passion,

[5] Subrata Mitra, Dulal Dutta and Bansi Chandragupta respectively.

conceit and prejudice and who is trapped by the irresistible forces of history. Under the rule of the British East India Company the zamindar or landlord class enjoyed immense prosperity, many zamindars living in fabulous luxury. As the salient features of modern economic history materialised, the zamindars' virtual stranglehold on wealth came to be challenged by competing interests and, along with reforms in land distribution and revenue collection, their power and privilege started to decline. Zamindars like Biswambhar Roy indeed aided in their own decline by obdurately holding to egocentric values about status that led them to spend beyond their means. Biswambhar Roy is presented as the scion of a decadent aristocratic house, quite incapable of recognising let alone adapting to forces of modernity, utterly unable to see beyond his own interests, and obsessed with notions of status and prestige, which feed a conceit that makes him an incorrigible profligate in financial matters.

It is significant that the film should focus so intensely on its central character, for Ray's intention is to show Biswambhar as a law unto himself, influenced in no way by others nor caught up in any kind of social or moral interaction. The story is his: the actions and their consequences, the tragedy and its blame; hence, the opening shot is a big close-up of Biswambhar's face, clearly intended to establish at the outset the predominance in the film of this one man. Apart from familial relationships, the only association of any significance that he has is with a neighbour, Mahim Ganguly. Mahim is incongruous to Biswambhar's society in that he belongs to the growing, socially ascendant class of wealthy men who have derived their money from trade and industry. Thus, there is in this association the potential for conflict, but it is obviated by the unassailable dominance of Biswambhar, a dominance which, ironically, prescribes Biswambhar's own undoing.

There is little narrative to speak of, the most significant element of it being for Biswambhar the tragic loss of his wife and young

son. Ray illustrates Biswambhar's love for his son in a number of ways, the most extravagant being the occasion of the boy's *upanayan* or sacred thread ceremony.[6] Of some note concerning this great celebration is the absence from the climax of the festivities of the boy himself and his mother. Ray gives some brief glimpses of the ritual procedures, the fireworks display (with faint echoes of *Aparajita* and presentiment of *Devi*) and the brass band playing a nationalist tune.[7] However, the pinnacle of the celebrations is a *jalsa* or music recital showing Biswambhar steeped in his greatest passion. The pre-modern values of Biswambhar's world are highlighted by the absence of women—save performers—in the audience; it may also be assumed that the boy, despite his new elevation, is still a boy and has gone to bed. Thus, the grand *jalsa* for which Biswambhar has spared no expense on the occasion of his son's *upanayan* shows the declining zamindar in his element. There can be no doubting that the *jalsa* is *his*, put on as a display of *his* prestige. The only mention of mortgaged money is whispered by the faithful servant Taraprasanna or spoken behind closed doors by Mahamaya, Biswambhar's wife.

This musical extravagance allows Mahamaya to level two specific complaints at Biswambhar. One concerns his profligacy with the family's dwindling financial resources, which he laughs off, patronisingly reassuring her that she is not to worry herself over such things. Indeed, throughout the film it is clear that Biswambhar does not worry himself over such matters, either, leaving such fretting to his *nayeb* or financial manager, Taraprasanna. Her other complaint is that their son, fondly called Khoka, is becoming too much like his father, taking on his passion for music and his love of riding. Biswambhar laughs off this complaint too, though not without a swell of pride.

[6] A ceremony for high-caste boys in which a boy is invested with a sacred thread indicating his full membership of his caste.

[7] Dwijendralal Roy's *Dhanya dhane puspe bhara.*

Subsequent scenes illustrate the relationship between father and son through the boy's practice of singing, accompanied by his father, his fondness for the elephant, Moti, and his learning to ride the horse, Tufan.

A seemingly inconsequential turn of events leads the narrative adventitiously to take on tragic proportions. Soon after the *upanayan* ceremony Mahamaya takes Khoka by boat to visit her ailing father some distance away. During their absence Biswambhar's perversity comes to the fore, prompted by his arrogant desire to put Mahim Ganguly in his place. Mahim pays a visit to Biswambhar to invite him to a celebration of the opening of his newly built house—a grand edifice, apparently, complete with electricity generator and fine foreign furniture—to be held on a particularly auspicious day, the first of the month of Vaishakh, the first day of the Bengali new year. [8] Biswambhar's response is to courteously decline, the courtesy being worth nothing as it rests on a pretext that is entirely false. Biswambhar declares that he has arranged a celebration in his own house for that day, and the look on the face of the *nayeb*, Taraprasanna, is a clear indication of Biswambhar's lie. After Mahim's departure Biswambhar orders Taraprasanna to turn the lie into a truth. There remains very little money or jewellery to pay for such a festivity of 'auspicious rent collection' culminating in a *jalsa* performed by eminent musicians, but Biswambhar is not deterred; his function will, at all costs, outshine that of Mahim Ganguly. It is sadly evident that such profligacy does not emanate out of Biswambhar's passion for music; it is merely the expression of irrepressible pride. It is, indeed, his hubris, and he will suffer for it.

Biswambhar regards his celebration to be important enough to bring his wife and son home early from their visit to his father-in-law's house and sends a letter by boat directing them

[8] In mid-April.

to return on the morning of the first of Vaishakh. Ray offers a number of signs to prepare us for the fact that it is on this particular detail that Biswambhar's grand plan will go awry. There is a scene in which we see Biswambhar watching anxiously through the window; the day is well advanced and Taraprasanna, perceiving his master's apprehensiveness, reports that the houseboat has not yet arrived and offers to send out a couple of small boats to enquire about it. His exit is followed by a significant shot of Biswambhar setting right an ornamental boat on a table, overturned presumably by the wind blowing in through the window. Evening falls, the guests arrive for the *jalsa*, but there is still no word of the boat. The visual signs of an impending catastrophe are clear: Biswambhar, pacing restlessly, looks out to see the sky bearing black, heavy storm clouds; a little later his attention is caught by a curtain blowing in the now stronger breeze and, as it blows up, we see through the window the sky rent by lightning; the huge chandelier in the music room is now swaying in the breeze and its smaller appendages are swinging in obvious agitation; and there is an extraordinarily telling shot of an insect frantically struggling to save itself from drowning in Biswambhar's glass. All the while Biswambhar's face tries to signify the genial host while being scarcely able to conceal his obvious anxiety. Eventually his agitation drives him outside where he meets Taraprasanna and receives the terrible news that the boat has sunk; moments later he receives the body of his beloved son being carried to him by a servant. The sin of pride has been met by a mighty blow. Nevertheless, Biswambhar will sin again, and the next blow will finish him.

Biswambhar's final costly soiree is prompted by another invitation from Mahim, this time to attend the opening of his own music room. Not only might Mahim be seen to be aspiring to the cultural brilliance appropriate to Biswambhar's life in establishing his own *jalsaghar*, but his engagement of one

Krishnabai, a *kathak*[9] dancer of considerable renown, would seem to be exceeding the highest of standards for which Biswambhar has been noted. However, Biswambhar's attitude toward Mahim on this occasion is warmer than on their previous encounters, and the lordliness that had the older man lounging while the younger stood, his disdain obvious despite the formal courtesy, is no longer apparent. Mahim is asked to sit facing Biswambhar, and before his departure he is offered sherbet. Biswambhar's courtesy in declining Mahim's invitation this time has a ring of sincerity to it, and there is an almost familial warmth in his plea that at his age he cannot get out and about any more. After Mahim leaves, he resolves that there will be a *jalsa* the next night, but this time it is not so much to go one up on Mahim but more as a desperate endeavour to revive something of the lost splendour of his own life. Well aware that it will all but exhaust his resources, he determines to engage Krishnabai.

We learn that the *jalsaghar* has been closed for some time – a simple indication that music has gone out of Biswambhar's life. He is too old to ride any more, too, so in what does his life consist? He is now a lonely old man, greatly withdrawn since the deaths of his wife and son and now merely living out his days. He orders the *jalsaghar* to be unlocked and, on entering it, steps a little way into his vivacious past. At first there is a shock on seeing the grand old room in such a state – cobwebs on the chandelier, the mirror grimy and opaque, the cushions strewn about gathering dust. But despite the room's forlorn and drab appearance, Biswambhar is soon overwhelmed by nostalgia, an emotional experience so very well brought out by a melange of snatches of various pieces of music heard over—tabla, sitar, vocal, ensemble—which seem to whirl through his mind, bringing back to him his past *jalsas*, as he looks around at the

[9] A form of semi-classical dance that tells stories, often from the Epics but most popularly relating to the life of Lord Krishna.

now dormant splendour. For a moment his vanity is obviously bruised when he catches a glimpse in the mirror of his own ageing face. For the last time he brings distress to the long-suffering, thrifty Taraprasanna by ordering that there will be a *jalsa* the next night and that Krishnabai shall be engaged to perform.

The magnificent music room is soon restored to its erstwhile elegance; the guests arrive; the performance is stunning. Biswambhar's last *jalsa* is an unquestioned triumph. Then, after the guests and the performers have gone, Biswambhar, more than a little drunk, indulges his pride and, wallowing in his triumph, salutes the portraits of his illustrious ancestors, his vanity being slightly compromised when he notices a large spider sitting on his own portrait. He is noticeably disconcerted as he watches the lights burn out in the chandelier, and this prompts his servant Ananta to take him outside where the sun can now be seen to have come up. On impulse he makes an irrational attempt to resurrect his younger self, and orders Ananta to bring his riding dress and to have Taraprasanna make Tufan ready. As he gallops off across the broad sandy banks of the diminished river, he rides straight at a beached boat, at which the horse suddenly rears, throwing his elderly rider to the ground and his death.

Certain people's deaths are often rationalised by clichés, and in this case it might be easy to romantically suggest that Biswambhar dies in some element of glory, decked out in his formal riding attire and mounted on his cherished Tufan; he does not suffer but dies suddenly, like a knight struck down in battle. The low shot with the camera looking up to the rearing horse offers a splendid picture, a classical study in animal movement, that might offer an epic dimension to this terrible misadventure. However, the end of Biswambhar Ray is little other than a costume drama in which a pathetic old man, bolstered in his cups by a surfeit of hollow, archaic pride, dies

an utterly unnecessary death. Only a few minutes before his madcap ride, Biswambhar tells Ananta that the reason for his superiority over Mahim is a simple matter of blood. Now, at the moment of his death, we see his blood spilled on the sand, while Mahim's still runs through his veins.

Central to the film is the notion of the new superseding the old. However, *Jalsaghar* does not offer a view on the conflict between tradition and modernity in the sense in which *Devi*,[10] for example, does. There is no condemnation of the outdated and commendation of the new; rather, Ray presents a picture of an egoistic conservative, rankled by that which he deems to be inferior and vulgar, desperately hanging on to that narrow world with which he is familiar. The film can hardly be said to offer any case *for* the modern; rather, it is a portrayal of the vanity and futility of one man's endeavour to cling to the outdated.

Even before Mahim Ganguly appears on screen, Biswambhar's disdain for him is made evident. His first acknowledgement of him refers to him with hardly repressed contempt as the son of a usurer. Although Mahim comes to visit Biswambhar with a business proposition which, according to Taraprasanna, could be very profitable for Biswambhar and considerably ease his financial strain, the proud zamindar treats his neighbour barely courteously, receiving him in a way which leaves no doubt in anyone's mind about who considers himself superior to whom, notwithstanding any amount of money that may be on offer. In fact, Biswambhar sees a cursory dealing with the younger man to be appropriate and soon dismisses him without his business proposition even being raised. The setting of this encounter establishes the undercurrent of arrogance particularly well. Biswambhar has just returned from riding, his demeanour clearly exuding the air of one recently steeped in an aristocratic activity. He agrees to meet Mahim in the grand music room, a hall beautifully decorated and its walls graced with the huge portraits

[10] See Chapter 7.

of Biswambhar's ancestors. Biswambhar sits facing the performing area, behind which is a vast mirror, and the camera, placed behind Biswambhar, portrays the scene as it is reflected in the mirror. Biswambhar remains seated, Mahim is obliged to stand; Biswambhar takes a glass of something refreshing, Mahim is offered nothing; at the opening and closing of the meeting, Biswambhar imperiously allows Mahim to touch his feet in obeisance. Observing the scene from behind through the medium of the mirror lends an even greater spaciousness to the grand hall as well as underlining the detachment Biswambhar imposes between himself and his visitor. At their second meeting, when Mahim comes to invite Biswambhar to his housewarming celebrations, the zamindar is seen recumbent on a couch, affecting to read a magazine. Again Mahim pays his respects with the appropriate obsequiousness and which Biswambhar receives with an assumed indifference; again the visitor remains standing and is offered no refreshment. Through the thick and formal courtesy, Biswambhar's disdain is unmistakable.

As well as reference in the dialogue to such things as Mahim's belonging to the newly rich class, there are a number of images that Ray employs to immediately set him off as distinct from Biswambhar. Biswambhar is often seen consuming tobacco, always through the ornate and somewhat ungainly hookah prepared for him by a servant; Mahim smokes the more convenient cigarette. Music is the great passion of Biswambhar's life; not only does he listen with profound appreciation but he also plays, it would seem, quite competently. For Mahim, however, it is an acquired interest. When he first talks about music with Biswambhar, it is evident that he knows very little. At Biswambhar's soirees he appears somewhat distracted, intent more on stuffing his nostrils with snuff than listening to the recital. His eventual acquisition of a music room is not a natural adjunct of his love for the art but a ramification of his need to keep up with his illustrious neighbour. At Biswambhar's last

jalsa he is about to shed some of his excess wealth by tossing it to the *kathak* dancer; there is a close up of the handle of Biswambhar's walking stick restraining his hand—protocol has it that the privilege of expressing appreciation first belongs to the host, and Mahim has shown himself as a philistine.

Apart from Mahim's efficiency and Biswambhar's profligacy, the most striking distinction between them lies in the trappings of modernity that mark the gradual increase in Mahim's wealth. One night, after his wife and son have left on their visit, Biswambhar is seen relaxing, smoking his hookah and listening to a musician quietly playing to him. He is suddenly distracted and calls to his servant to find out what the strange noise is that has claimed his attention. Mahim Ganguly, we learn, has acquired a generator to provide him with electric light, and its noise can be heard even some distance away. Biswambhar ventures out onto the roof and the ugly mechanical sound becomes plainer, contrasting grossly with the beautiful sounds of the sarod just heard. Ray also offers a striking visual image of the stark modernity of Mahim contrasting with the romantic traditionalism of Biswambhar. We see Moti the elephant in medium long shot; then a truck is heard and seen approaching from Mahim's house. As the petrol-driven machine roars past and into the distance, the ancient and majestic beast is obscured by the dust that it sends up.

Biswambhar would never seem to waver from traditional values, not only as an expression of established courtesy but also as a means of exploiting an opportunity to display his prestige. On the occasion of the *upanayan* of Mahim's son, Biswambhar takes one of the several remaining gold coins from the safe and directs Taraprasanna to place it on a silver plate and take it on elephant's back to Mahim's house. Taraprasanna humbly points out that there are no silver plates left, so Biswambhar's grand gesture must be compromised by a bronze plate. The *nayeb*, suitably dressed and mounted on Moti the elephant, is seen heading off

to Mahim's house to the left of the frame. A little later, from the left of the frame, comes Mahim in his new car, the ugly Claxon horn sounding. It is a very effective contrast, enhanced with value when Mahim laments how the humble *nayeb* riding the elephant was salaamed by the villagers, whereas he, in his new car, endured the indignity of their throwing stones.

Visually, the film offers a number of points of interest. In the opening sequence the camera is especially efficacious in establishing a basis for the understanding of Biswambhar. The first shot is a big close-up of his face, emphasising the categorical centrality of this man to the film. He is seated alone on the roof of his house, being attended to by the servant, Ananta, who has brought him his hookah and a glass of sherbet. He seems distracted and almost unaware of Ananta's presence. The camera follows him about when he rises and we notice the bare spatial context of his huge mansion. As the house appears to be remote from much else (although we later learn that Mahim Ganguly's house is not far away), Biswambhar too is established as isolated, detached even from the servant who tends him. It is of value that such a sense of isolation be generated at the beginning of the film, for Ray will show Biswambhar to be a man who has become alone and lonely, a man in touch with society only through music, an anachronism who has become quite out of touch with the ways of the world. The notion of isolation is re-emphasised during the depths of Biswambhar's loss. After the grand *jalsa* for the first of Vaishakh has been interrupted by news of the tragedy, there is a cut to some neo-classical statuary outside the house. It is the next day, and the rain brought by the previous day's storm is pelting down. With the sound of the sarod playing over, the camera slowly moves over the fields surrounding Biswambhar's home and we see that all is under water. The harbinger of the life-giving rain has claimed the lives of Biswambhar's wife and son, and now the abundance of water has, albeit temporarily, cut him off further from the world.

Of course, there is some ironic amelioration of this stark isolation. The occasional shot of the front of the old stately home portrays a grandeur that is more than corroborated by the broad entry hall with its tasteful decoration and exposed beams, the magnificent timber staircase and, even more so, the sumptuous music room. The décor of the room is enriched by the large mirror enhancing its spaciousness, the immense chandelier with its innumerable candles, the life-size portraits of Biswambhar's ancestors hanging on the walls and the gleaming white sheets and cushions strewn about the floor for the comfort of musicians and music-lovers, all of which tells of a splendid past and a lifestyle quite incongruous with Biswambhar's actual material position.

Music, naturally, is a virtual character in *Jalsaghar*, where it is employed for two purposes: conventionally for atmospheric reasons, as background sound, and for the narrative, as integral to the action. It is when the music becomes an integral part of the action that the cinematic value of the film might be felt to be compromised. There are four such cases: one is when Khoka is practising his vocal exercises accompanied by his father playing the sarangi;[11] the others are the three *jalsa* sessions. The fundamental criticism is that all are too long. None of these episodes can be said to be music for its own sake—or merely filmed music—for they are all media to more than the simple communication of music; however, the extra-musical purposes could have been as well served in a more concentrated musical context.

In Khoka's scene the intention is to show the talent of the boy and his following in his father's footsteps, a fact lightly lamented earlier by his mother. Nevertheless, we see here Mahamaya's pride in her son. We also note, incidentally yet

[11] A stringed instrument held in front of the musician and bowed laterally, rather in the manner of a cello.

significantly, Biswambhar's own proficiency as a musician. However, the music *per se* dominates these intentions of meaning. The three *jalsa* performances alone take up nearly eighteen minutes of a film that runs for ninety-four minutes. The first is the shortest and does little more than show the faces of artistes and listeners, the simple point being to establish Biswambhar as the devotee of the art and Mahim as the roughly polished pretender. The second performance is twice as long, but does serve to go hand in hand with the growing tension being experienced by Biswambhar as he awaits with increasing anxiety the arrival of his wife and son. Throughout the sequence there is a very fine balance maintained between the serenity of the music and the restrained agitation of Biswambhar. However, one cannot help feeling that the Ray who later made *Devi* and *Charulata* would have achieved as profound an intensity of the dramatic effect with a greater economy of action. The last performance must certainly appear as an end in itself, running for as long as the previous two together and conveying little more than a few unnecessarily comic references to Ananta's child-like enjoyment of the evening and Mahim's now seemingly grown pride and cheek.

In so many respects *Jalsaghar* bears witness to the cinematic genius of its maker. The camerawork is superb throughout, engendering an immediacy of appreciation of the ambivalent world of the film's central character, where opulence and parsimony exist in counterpoint to one another. The dialogue is sharp and to the point, never allowing the visual experience of the film to be attenuated by a surfeit of talk. The music is magnificent, but that may be said to be the film's one notable shortcoming, for many will feel that the sublimity of the music detracts from the integrity of the film. As long as the *jalsas* do not blend organically with the narrative, they stand out as something distinct, so compromising the form of the film as a whole.

In 1962, Ray made another film in a provincial setting, but this is a work as different as could be imagined from *Jalsaghar* and the trilogy films. *Abhijan,* also derived from a work of Tarashankar, is set in some insignificant small town somewhere in the west of Bengal and its ambience is the society of earthy taxi drivers and petty criminals. Some time ago I wrote that *Abhijan* "is rarely more than clumsy artifice"[12]—a judgement that was hastily conceived and, I think now, unfair. This is not to say that *Abhijan* is a particularly fine film, but it is not Ray's worst and, on account of some rather memorable aspects, warrants more than cursory comment.

The significance of narrative in all of Ray's films cannot be understated. *Abhijan* is one film in which plot is particularly detailed and intricate. The moral dimension of the film is not as obvious as it is in many of Ray's other works, and the examination of character is not as intense as it is in most of them. In *Abhijan,* story is paramount, lending meaning to character and whatever edifying significance the film might offer.

Narsingh is a taxi driver who, with the help of his trusty assistant, Rama, runs his 1930s Chrysler over country roads from one small town to the next. His sense of rivalry with other drivers and his own daredevil driving lead to the loss of his taxi licence and, consequently, his job. On the way back to his home village at night, he comes across a man stranded by the road, his bullock dray having been damaged by slipping into a ditch. The man, Sukhanram, makes his wealth obvious, offering an inflated fee to be driven with the woman accompanying him to his home in Shyamnagar. Soon Sukhanram is quite taken with Narsingh and offers to set him up as a taxi driver in Shyamnagar and to provide him with accommodation. By chance Narsingh discovers that one of the other drivers—Joseph, a government

[12] John W. Hood, *The Essential Mystery. Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema,* p. 70.

employee and a Christian – belongs to a family who had common village connections to Narsingh's grandfather. A friendship is quickly set up, and Joseph takes Narsingh to his home to meet his mother and his sister, Nilima. There is a ready bond formed between Narsingh and Nilima, while Narsingh is also very civil and kind to Nilima's friend and colleague, the disabled Ajay. It transpires that Sukhanram is involved in more than one or two shady deals, one of which is a trade in women. Indeed, the woman, Gulabi, who was with him the night Narsingh drove him home to Shyamnagar was part of this trade. One night Gulabi comes to Narsingh for protection from the harassment and molestation she is suffering in Sukhanram's house. Their relationship is platonic from the outset, but a simple friendship develops. After Nilima asks Narsingh to drive her and Ajay to the station so that they may elope to Calcutta and get married, Narsingh shows a greater interest in Gulabi. Sukhanram wants to set Narsingh up in a partnership in a monopoly transport service, one of the conditions of which is to transport 'tins of ghee' to the neighbouring town of Panchmati. Joseph warns Narsingh that Sukhanram's enterprise is not entirely within the law and Gulabi goes further to tell him that the tins contain not ghee but opium. After a heated altercation with Gulabi and an even more severe one with Joseph, Narsingh decides against being a drug-runner, rescues Gulabi from Sukhanram and drives off to a better life.

Of overwhelming importance to *Abhijan* is the character of Narsingh, who is present in virtually every scene of the film. Indeed, the pre-titles sequence brings some of his past into the film's present. It is a superb little scene, set in a liquor den, with a mechanic called Naskar trying to persuade Narsingh to form a business partnership with him. It is not Narsingh but Naskar who dominates the scene. Naskar's visually arresting face appears in close shot on the right of the screen, looking towards the camera. Narsingh's face, also in close shot, appears on the

left of the screen as a mirror image in the glass behind Naskar. Naskar has most of the dialogue and a greater share of an opportunity to display personality, and yet the subject is exclusively Narsingh. A number of important things about him are compressed into this little scene. Narsingh is a Kshatriya,[13] a descendant of Rajput warrior aristocracy. Despite his obvious economic lowliness, his sense of 'blood' dominates his view of himself and his attitude to others. He makes no bones about being superior to 'inferior' people like Naskar—who sees no relevance in "someone on horseback fourteen generations ago"—and his arrogance provokes hostility from the other drivers, something he does nothing to minimise. He remains stand-offish and more than a little ill-tempered. Some time back, according to Naskar's narration, his wife left him for a man with money. This, it would seem, has sharpened Narsingh's sensitivity to the possibility of betrayal; he sees no reason to trust the commonplace Naskar and will not run the risk of being betrayed by him—"There will be no partnership. Never." He has also developed an animosity towards women in general, seen a little later in his refusal to allow a marriage party including the bride to get into his car and then his initial refusal to allow the woman with Sukhanram to board the taxi when he encounters them on the road at night. There is an element of irony in both these prejudices: he will be persuaded into partnership with Sukhanram, whose fortune is built on shady deals and petty crime, and he will form a respectful interest in two women, even allowing them to ride in his car. Perhaps arising out of his experience of rejection, he is teaching himself English "so that people will look up to me".

More of Narsingh is revealed during the titles sequence. The picture is of Narsingh driving, his car filled with passengers. We

[13] In the original Vedic order the Kshatriyas were warriors and rulers, second to the priestly caste, Brahmans, in the fourfold *varna* system from which the extensive and complex caste system emanated.

note his intensity and a manner of driving that is little short of reckless. The dominant shot during this sequence is of his identification photograph hanging below the centre of the dashboard. It is a double picture: a portrait shot of himself revealing a characteristic stern frown; beside it, on the left, is a picture of a traditional Rajput warrior on horseback, a candid indication of his pride in his ancestry. His utter indifference to his passengers and total unconcern for their conversation or even their attempts at civility with him soon become obvious.

The other characters are particularly well drawn and convincingly portrayed. Rama is Narsingh's devoted assistant who rides shotgun when Narsingh is driving, sometimes drives for him when he needs a rest, and acts as his servant, even his minder. He provides a steadfast, good-natured sop to Narsingh's moods and bad temper. The role is exceptionally well played by Robi Ghosh, whose acting in other films is often marked with an obviousness of working busily; here, however, he is relaxed and at ease and the performance is the more memorable for that. His two pieces of mime, especially the one by the pond in trying to attract the attention of Gulabi, are very cleverly done and kept well within the limitations of the character and the needs of the narrative.

Sukhanram is utterly plausible, oily and just a little too obviously good-natured to be trustworthy. His involvement in sleaze and crookedness is gradually revealed, first during his massage in the company of a guest for whose carnal needs he has made provision, later with the lawyer, Mukherjee, for whom a similar favour has been arranged, and then in the affair of the 'tins of ghee'. None of this comes across as at all anomalous, and the character is clearly seen as a cogent force that even the latter-day Rajput finds hard to resist. When Narsingh openly challenges him about the legality of the business in which he wants Narsingh to be involved, he says quite blatantly that no business is completely honest and that no businessman worth the name

gets by without some crooked activities.[14] "It is when a man declares his business to be straight that I get suspicious." Narsingh is persuaded by this plausibility.

Gulabi is exceptionally well presented, both in concept and performance. Her beautiful, almost hypnotic eyes establish an immediate rapport with the viewer. For some time she remains a mystery, hidden away in Sukhanram's house, but one night she comes to Narsingh, apparently having perceived something lofty in his character, seeking protection from the harassment and molestation she has been suffering at the hands of Sukhanram and his friends. At first Narsingh, true to his suspicion of women and fear of betrayal, is unsympathetic to her pleas, but he soon gives in to her and lets her spend the night in a corner of his squalid room. The fact that he does not take advantage of her enhances her respect for him, and as she continues to rely on him for protection he comes more and more to trust her. Hence, a simple friendship starts to evolve, developing to the lovely shot of Gulabi sitting and fanning Narsingh as he sleeps, the worse for wear for a brawl earlier in the evening.

A genuine highlight of the film is the beautifully presented scene in which Gulabi remembers her bleak past and innocently looks forward to a bright and happy future. It is wholly Gulabi's scene, superbly under-played by Waheeda Rehman who brings out so gently yet so powerfully the pain and the pathos of a simple girl whose life has been ruined by the ignorance and abuse of others and their exploitation of her. Ultimately the scene offers a promise of triumph as this same simple girl is now strengthened to look beyond the cruel fate to which she had seemed to be destined. By some standards the scene would not seem to have started out very auspiciously. It is the morning

[14] Nearly thirty years later this plea that "everyone else does it" will be made to justify dishonest business practices in *Shakha Prashakha.;* see Chapter 10. There are also more general references to crooked business practices in the films of the Calcutta triptych; see Chapter 5.

after the night before when Narsingh, drunk and disappointed after seeing Nilima walk out of his life, sends for Gulabi, obviously intending to put her to the use for which Sukhanram acquired her. We do not know what happened in bed. We can only observe that the next morning Gulabi's face is aglow and Narsingh is relaxed and gentle in her company.

The scene opens with a reminder of Narsingh's drunkenness as he stoops to pick up the mess of a broken bottle. Gulabi sneaks in behind him and playfully startles him. She has an enhanced demeanour in the light of the day, her beautiful eyes and the customary tattooed dots on her chin admired by village women brought into relief in a way that the night light had been unable to achieve. She then presents him with some sweets she has made for him. He observes that this is the first time she has come to him during the day and asks her if she is afraid of her master. "You are my master," she replies, with the very barest hint of embarrassment. She then sets about displaying, quite incidentally, her wifely credentials. While she is folding up the bedclothes, she mentions that her grandmother taught her to make sweets, and that she knows how to cook, sew and grind rice. As though it is her crowning virtue, she looks a little hesitant as she tells him she also knows how to sing, and proceeds to offer a simple song in which she bewails to Lord Ram the fact that her beloved is away from her and prays to the god to let them be always together. As she gets a little confident, she claps her hands to draw his attention to her when she notices that he is more intent on trimming his whiskers than on her song. Now he is her captive audience, she dares to be coquettish, cheekily pulling the end of her sari over one side of her face and dancing towards him, the jingling of her anklets providing a rhythm for her song.

So easily, and in a remarkably matter-of-fact manner, she slips from the light-hearted present to her bleak past. On the day when she was sexually assaulted, her mother died, and the rest

of the family accused her of putting a fatal curse on her mother by 'her sin'. They beat her and kicked her and dragged her by the hair and locked her up without food or water for seven days. During that time she thought constantly about death and even planned to hang herself. The reason she gives for not committing suicide is extraordinarily moving in its innocence and simplicity. Three realisations made her choose life over death: the fact that it would soon be the Dussehra Festival with its variety of community celebrations; her friend would be getting married not long after, and the shehnai would play and the groom would come on a white horse to fetch his bride; and she maintained her trust in the assurance given her by her grandmother when she was a little girl that one day such a prince would also come for her. Such is a simple village girl's wonder at life. Gulabi is no Rajput princess, and yet Narsingh is visibly moved by her candour.

Some of the dialogue in the scene is almost comic in its ingenuousness yet it is firmly in character. After he has eaten the sweets, she asks him if he liked them. He replies, "Anything tastes good when you're hungry." This is reassurance enough for her, and she smiles with satisfaction. Later she tells him that she had wanted to tie a stone around her neck and jump into the pond behind their house. "Why didn't you?" he asks. She replies, "Because I was locked up inside."

The scene ends with a presentiment of further disappointment for Gulabi. Her dream is to marry Narsingh and be taken away from Shyamnagar to somewhere else. Obviously they cannot stay in Shyamnagar as long as Sukhanram sees her as his property, but if they were to leave Narsingh would have to give up his commercial ambitions. There is a short endeavour to justify himself as he talks of the respect that at last will come to him and he will no longer be looked down on, but Ray very clearly puts this into perspective by keeping Narsingh in the background, his face turned from the camera, keeping in the foreground in

sharp focus the concerned look on the face of Gulabi. Deflated she leaves, but Narsingh calls her back with a suggestion of hope. "Will you come to me tonight?" It brings at least a slight smile to her face.

Of the major characters Sukhanram is the one immoral person, and Gulabi and, near the end, Joseph try to persuade Narsingh not to get involved with him. It is Gulabi who tells him that the ghee tins contain opium and asks him if that is not a sin. His reply evades the question—"My wife left me. Isn't that a sin?" And then, somewhat heartlessly, "You come to me at night. Isn't that a sin?" It is this question that prompts her to let her emotion well up without quite becoming melodramatic or self-pitying. She replies, "Yes, it is a sin for a girl like me to love someone." Now the strength of her morality stands out and her worthiness as a Rajput wife is made evident. He tells her to be here for him when he returns in an hour or so. She questions this and he tells her that the reason is because he told her to be there. Contradicting her lovely acknowledgement of him as her master earlier, she now says that he is not her master, cutting him with "My master is the man who is your master." In other words, a man who deals in whores and narcotics has got them both under his control. She leaves with a contemptuous and sarcastic, "Goodbye, Rana Pratap Singh."[15] The relationship has changed dramatically. If there is to be a reconciliation, it will have to be on her moral terms, not according to Narsingh's compromised morality.

Joseph and his sister Nilima are also convincing. Perhaps it is the fact that their grandfathers were friends that lets Narsingh relate comfortably to Joseph. Their friendship is a happy one, and Joseph extends help to Narsingh in getting his driving permit back as well as advising him about keeping peace with

[15] Sixteenth century Rajput leader (1572-97), famous for his defiance of Emperor Akbar; part of the significance of this reference is his white horse, Chetak.

the other drivers, most of whom are outwardly antagonistic towards him. Joseph maintains a tolerant neutrality towards them; being a Christian he could very easily turn their barely repressed antipathy to outward hostility. He is a strong, moral man who knows his own limitations. Nilima is a an attractive girl, and Narsingh is readily impressed with her intelligence and gentle charm. He is also kind and civil to her friend, Ajay, who had fallen from a rock when he was a boy and had to have a leg amputated. Her mother is quite heartless regarding Nilima's feelings for Ajay, having no faith in the prospects of a cripple to make a respectable husband for her daughter. It is an ordinary family with its strengths and its dissensions; it is the extraordinariness of the dissensions that so sadly ruptures the family's cohesion.

There is some interesting significance in drawing Joseph's family as Christians. As such they are isolates in the predominantly Hindu community. Joseph's unwavering uprightness and Nilima's education (she has that command of English to which Narsingh aspires) further enhance their distinctiveness. Narsingh too is an isolate, largely due to his sense of his own superiority, and also a misfit. Ajay the cripple is mocked by the children in the street and is rejected as a suitor by Nilima's mother; he too is an isolate. Gulabi, cast out by her own family and now forced to survive as a means of pleasure for immoral men, is another isolate. It is Joseph and his categorical refusal to accept Narsingh's involvement with Sukhanram's opium smuggling who brings about in Narsingh a reassessment of his prospects. Narsingh is the instrument of escape, hopefully to freedom, of Nilima and Ajay, and in Gulabi Narsingh would seem to have found emotional fulfilment. It is interesting to see this interaction of isolates trying to get by in a society with a not always sympathetic majority.

Visually, *Abhijan* is not at all far from Ray's better work. The starkness of so much of the film's content is exquisitely

complemented by the black and white cinematography, which has the effect of so often intensifying the subject in a way that would be diffused if the film were in colour. The road shots are especially attractive, yet the loveliness of the countryside marked out by the mostly submerged paddy-fields is not a distraction from the prime point of interest, usually Narsingh's face or the car being driven by him. The road shots are animated by flourishes of naturalism such as other modes of rural transport, and cattle using or crossing the road. One or two road shots at night are particularly appealing with the road lit by the car's headlights or the reflection of the moon in the waters of the paddy-fields. A near collision with a cow that just manages to get out of Narsingh's way is a memorably naturalist shot. However, it must be said that the road shots are also overdone; they are needlessly extensive and there is at least one too many (the last daytime one showing Narsingh overtaking a bus could well have been done without).

The extraordinary collection of boulders just outside of the town is in itself of great visual interest, and Ray uses it well as a context of isolation in three scenes as well as incidentally. According to Joseph a very large boulder seeming to balance precariously on a much smaller one had been given by a Christian preacher a symbolic interpretation in regard to the accumulation of sins. Some people may be able to see meaning in that, others will find it too esoteric. Nevertheless, this huge assemblage of rocks does offer an atmosphere of the exotic that complements the confusion in Narsingh's mind. It also engenders a feeling of the unknown and an accompanying eeriness that aptly serves as background for the elopement of Nilima and Ajay. It is ten o'clock at night when they go there to meet Narsingh, and all three faces are lit only by torchlight; this is particularly telling in lighting up the apprehensiveness on Nilima's face, the sad, appealing look on Ajay's, and the disappointment that is now coursing through the veins of Narsingh. The rocks also present

a sense of power mixed with threat—as seen in the shots of silhouetted vultures perched on the edges of the higher boulders—that provides the context for the awakening of Narsingh.

Shyamnagar is a small and insignificant place with nothing of any apparent quality to recommend it. In such a place Sukhanram may prosper in relative anonymity. His house is obviously degenerate: seamy on the outside, with signs of minor dilapidation, while inside we note the tasteless profusion of tacky pictures of gods and mythological figures, of Mahatma Gandhi and a somewhat under-dressed 'filmi' girl on a calendar covering much of the walls which are patchy from damp and from which much of the paint is peeling. In such a setting, wearing a lungi and a grubby singlet, Sukhanram is visually in his element. The room he has provided for Narsingh, seen mostly at night except for the lovely scene with Gulabi described earlier, is particularly slovenly and tawdry. Much of the glass in the windows is cracked, broken or missing, and Rama, put off by what he says is its stink, elects to sleep in the car.

There are some wide shots of the town during the day, showing it to be an unprepossessing place notable more for its dust than any semblance of beauty. At night Ray shows it to be especially squalid, lying under a pervasive, heavy gloom. Such bleak shots with an aural background of tribal drumming and singing give an exotic effect and enhance the underlying sense of isolation. The general squalor has as its focal point the sleaziness of the liquor den, the realism of which is very well depicted.

There are some delightful touches of naturalism throughout the film. One is the tendency to personalise the car.[16] When Narsingh loses his job and his permit at the start of the film we see him beating the car and blaming it for his shameful loss of face, almost as though he were equating the car with the wife who had betrayed him. It is Rama who comes in on the side of

[16] This is something that Ritwik Ghatak did very convincingly in his *Ajantrik* in 1958.

the car, persuading Narsingh not to be violent with 'her'. Again it is Rama who experiences the shock of hearing Sukhanram mention the likely sale of the car, and it is he who, to avoid losing what has become something of a loved one, offers—quite implausibly—to buy the car himself.

The yokels who are Narsingh's passengers exude a sufficient air of obvious rusticity without becoming caricatures. The monkeys provide a picturesque element in the natural backdrop, not just visually but also by reference, such as when Gulabi explains to Narsingh, quite ingenuously, that she had to make a new lot of sweets to bring him as the earlier lot had been left on the roof and was stolen by monkeys. A travelling circus offers a glimpse of rural life while providing a backdrop for Narsingh and Joseph to further their friendship, and a 'bioscope tent' sees Narsingh and Rama enjoying a night at the movies, Shyamnagar-fashion. There is also a not so delightful touch in Mukherjee the lawyer's removal of his dentures to illustrate to Narsingh the point that cars—like teeth—wear out and eventually must be done away with.

All of these positive features of the film are notably good as separate aspects. However, one of the main reasons that the film fails to impress as one of Ray's better works is the fact that the integration of all these discrete elements into a harmonious whole remains unfulfilled. Militating against such a harmony is the loose notion of form that gives the film a somewhat flaccid structure. Simply, there is not enough in the narrative to warrant a length of one hundred and forty minutes. The film is too long, often repetitious and long-winded, and too much time is given to inconsequential details (such as the lengthy shot of Narsingh and Nilima walking towards a retreating camera and discussing the question of sin, punishment and God). There is also an unnecessarily long sequence to suggest the passage of time: with music over, Narsingh is seen driving, then there are some shots of Rama driving, barely able to see over the steering

wheel, while Narsingh sleeps in the back, his feet protruding over the front seat; there is a shot of Narsingh walking and talking with Nilima and, a little later, driving with Nilima while she teaches him English; in between the walking and the driving shots there is a sequence showing the countryside from the moving car and then a shot of driver and passengers pushing the car, which has presumably broken down or run out of petrol. It is all relevant to the narrative and visually appealing, but very uneconomical. Something which ought to have been a major dramatic highlight—the brawl outside the liquor den—is uncomfortably ineffectual. After the excellent portrayal of the altercation in the bar, what follows outside is a pathetic grappling, often bordering on hugging, with only one punch—the one that fells Narsingh—being thrown. The absurd anti-climax to it all is the shot of one of the drunks giving a silly display of shadow-boxing.

Aspects of the ending are artistically impressive. The ending is prefaced by Gulabi's admirable stand on principle and then by Joseph's hostile rejection of Narsingh when he discovers the infamous ghee tin in the front of his car. It is the articulation of the rupture of a fine friendship implied in Joseph's emotional walking away from him that urges Narsingh to return the tin to Sukhanram. Learning from Sukhanram's servant that the boss has gone to see the lawyer, and from Rama that he has taken Gulabi with him, Narsingh goes in pursuit. This is a logical sequence of events. Then there is a lengthy profile shot of Narsingh driving, a shot which blends into a fantasy shot of Narsingh, turbaned and dressed in white, riding a white horse at a speed to match that of his car. This too is logical, as it is an expression of Narsingh's idealised view of himself as well as a fulfilment of Gulabi's dream that one day a prince will come for her. But it is hurried. The gentle irony of the actuality matching the dream is almost glossed over in the haste to get Narsingh to Sukhanram's carriage, rescue Gulabi and then drive off into the future, saying

goodbye to Joseph at the rocks as they go. Given that the film has been so long and at times drawn out, the ending is all too quick and easy. The collection of artistically impressive elements falls short of being an artistically memorable whole.

The underlying weakness of the film, however, is in the role of Narsingh, a huge role and a character who is central to virtually every scene in the film. The role is undoubtedly well written but miscast. There is no questioning Soumitra Chatterjee's immense talent as an actor, and in *Abhijan* he works intelligently and with obvious sensitivity; however, he is simply the wrong man for the job. For Narsingh to be truly convincing he needs to exude a natural, hard masculinity; the occasional snarl, frown or roughening up of the voice can be no substitute for the macho persona that is organic to the role. The right actor would have transcended the plot and actually become the film; Soumitra remains competently but mildly subservient to it.

One important moral value does come out of the film, and that is the power of humility. *Abhijan* does convey, with some success, the story of a man who would rise above humility, brought to his senses by humble people in Joseph and Gulabi, with the constant support of his devoted side-kick, Rama. Ultimately the film is a positive and credible trumpeting of the virtues of the relatively powerless. How much of it is 'clumsy artifice' is another issue. There are elements in the film, such as the fight outside the liquor den, as well as its repetitiousness and occasional long-windedness that militate against natural spontaneity. The most damaging artifice, however, lies is in the miscasting of its central charater.

In 1965 Satyajit Ray made a double bill under the title *Kapurush O Mahapurush*. In fact they are two quite discrete films, one entitled *Kapurush* ("The Coward") and the other *Mahapurush* ("The Holy Man"). With *Kapurush* running for seventy-five minutes and *Mahapurush* for sixty-five, the double bill may well be a convenience for exhibitors, but the films bear

no relation at all to one another, not even as a loose connection, as do the components of the Tagore triple bill with its inclusive title, *Tin Kanya*.[17]

First on the bill is a very well crafted character study set in the tea-growing country of north Bengal. One of the characters, Bimal Gupta, offers a formula for the plots of popular films: boy meets girl; boy gets girl; boy loses girl. One might add that usually boy gets girl back in order to bring about the mandatory happy ending. A similar formula might be applied to *Kapurush*: boy has girl; boy loses girl; boy tries to get girl back; boy fails. More important here than the curious dynamics of human relations is the notion of human character; this is given greater prominence than plot, which, however, could hardly be more minimal.

The film is exceptionally well acted. Apart from three very small parts—the garage proprietor and his attendant and the Guptas' servant—there are only three characters. Madhabi Mukherjee plays Karuna Gupta with consummate restraint, infusing the role with a delicate subtlety tempered by an overriding strength and maintaining a charm that is often challenged by a hint of tension and tinged with a sense of mystery. Her husband, Bimal, is a bit of a buffoon, a philistine, a snob, sometimes boorish, sometimes endearing, and an awful singer. Haradhan Banerjee plays the role with a consistent strength, his one weakness being the unconvincing delivery of his English lines (one is inclined to question the point of having characters speak in English in a Bengali film). Soumitra Chatterjee manages the undemanding role of Amitabh´ Roy; there is little challenge here, for Amitabh is not much of a character at all: he is, after all, the *kapurush*—the coward—significant for his abject *lack* of character.

Amitabh, a writer of film scenarios, is on a visit to north Bengal when his car breaks down. By chance, Bimal Gupta, a

[17] See Chapter 6.

prominent local tea-planter, happens to be in the garage when Amitabh is caught on a Saturday evening, unable to go anywhere and with nowhere to stay. He offers hospitality to the traveller and takes him back to his house, where Amitabh discovers that Mrs Karuna Gupta is the woman with whom he had a love affair some years before. There are three well conceived and appropriately placed flashback sequences substantiating this relationship and complementing Amitabh's renewed interest in re-igniting the affair.

The interest in this version of the eternal triangle lies not in action or intrigue but in character, particularly of the two men. Karuna left Amitabh for what he was—or lacked, to be precise—rather than for anything he might have done, while Amitabh feels Karuna should leave Bimal, not for anything he might have done but for what he is—or, at least, appears to be to Amitabh. Bimal is a very outgoing personality and it is his effusiveness that brings him to Amitabh in a generous endeavour to help him out in his moment of bother. Bimal readily explains that a tea-planter lives very much in isolation and the people with whom he mixes are few, largely because of what he describes as 'the caste system of the plantations', whereby a planter may mix socially only with another planter, but never with any subordinate. In a sense, Amitabh's inconvenience offers Bimal a social boon in that Amitabh's acceptance of Bimal's offer of hospitality promises a welcome change in company, at least for a night and a day. As he puts it, they are mutually dependent, Amitabh needing shelter and Bimal needing company. The long-established British influence on the tea-planters' world has indeed rubbed off on Bimal. His pipe, his baggy shorts, his whistling or, worse, singing, of popular Western tunes and his fondness for whisky all set him apart from the majority of Bengalis. His amused contempt for Bengali films and his assertion that the present generation of Bengalis "lacks moral fibre" detach him even further. While his wife tries to find some good music on

the radio, he sits chuckling over a book of cartoons. He is garrulous, easily given to hearty laughter even if it is not shared by his company, and a little domineering. Nevertheless, he is also a generous host and an obviously straight character, whose blatancy, albeit at times unrefined, suggests that he can be suspected of no ulterior motive or any kind of deviousness at all. The worst that might be said of him is that he is a good-natured, well-meaning bore, a condition that probably stems from his dissatisfaction with his job and its isolation, along with the narrow society that comes from the "strict caste system" which characterises local social conventions. The "boredom and drudgery" that emanate from this way of life are dispelled by whisky, a necessity of life for Bimal. (It is a little disconcerting, however, that given that he is evidently such a seasoned drinker, he does get drunk a little too easily in Amitabh's company.) He later says to Amitabh, "If you have a conscience, you need whisky in which to drown it," and then laughs heartily at his own observation that "it will only be kept afloat by tea".

Amitabh, on the other hand, says very little, not that Bimal gives him much chance. The main reason for his reticence is the discomfort that comes from the realisation that his hostess is Karuna whom he once might have married. He is deferential to Bimal, not only because he is his host but also—and it remains unknown to Bimal—because of his past with Karuna. Indeed, as the hours go by he becomes preoccupied with her, their past and what hope there might be for a future.

The key to understanding Amitabh lies in the first of the flashback sequences. Ray sets this up quite subtly from the time that Amitabh arrives at the Guptas' home until he retires to his room after dinner. There are several clear but incidental indications of tension between himself and Karuna, the first being the most dramatic, yet simple, nevertheless. Karuna, trying to tune the radio, has her back to the door when her husband and his guest come in. When Bimal announces that he is not

alone, she turns and sees Amitabh. Amitabh's gesture of *namaskar* is momentarily suspended and there is a brief stunned look on both their faces. It is significant to note that Karuna appears to recover from this sudden discomfort almost immediately; Amitabh clearly does not recover from it at all. There is Bimal telling Amitabh that his wife had mentioned that she had known an Amitabh Roy in college, but not a screen-writer by that name, and there is the occasional glance from Amitabh at Karuna. After dinner, Karuna plays a solitary game of cards, Bimal talks about tea-planting, and Western music is heard from the radio in the background, but Amitabh is totally distracted by the presence of Karuna.

After they retire to their rooms, Amitabh is alone with his thoughts until Karuna brings some drinking water to him. He tries to talk with her, but Karuna—who will be shown to be in total control of the several situations in which she finds herself alone with Amitabh—maintains her distance, refusing to engage with his conversation in any meaningful way. Her answers to his questions and responses to his comments are evasive. He says, "I can't stand you being so polite to me and calling me Mr Roy"; she replies, "Would you prefer me to be rude?" He says, "Do you mean to say that you are happy to see me again?" She replies, "Do I look unhappy?" Non-committal and self-possessed, she leaves him, tormented with the memory that will now be presented as the first flashback.

They are still students: he studies economics and she is an art student. Karuna lives with her uncle and Amitabh lives in a hostel. One evening, quite unexpected, Karuna comes for the first time to Amitabh's room. It being unseemly for young women to visit men in their rooms, Amitabh is somewhat disarmed at her appearance and nervously bars the door behind her. She has come with the news, which she presents at first in a casually teasing way, that she is going away. Her uncle has accepted a transfer to Patna and he will take her with him. Despite her

affected playfulness she is clearly distressed, for this spells the end of their affair unless they can do something to make it permanent. While her mood becomes more serious and more urgent, Amitabh fails to engage with her, maintaining what seems to be an assumed sympathy for the gravity as she sees it and remaining detached from her, both physically and emotionally. Karuna, it seems, is more than willing to take whatever step is necessary to keep their relationship intact. Her love for Amitabh is exceptionally strong and he has given her to believe that he feels the same way about her. However, his response to this crisis is at best lukewarm. When she says that she will get a job and that he might get one too, he looks horrified for a moment and can bring himself to say only, "This is a very harsh city . . ." Here she starts to realise that what has been a matter of extreme urgency to her has not been of much moment to him and that his unresponsiveness suggests a corresponding lack of feeling on his part. He evades her look and turns to the window; the camera has Karuna in close-up as she fidgets gently with the chain around her neck, her brow furrowed in a frown; her feelings are extraordinarily well complemented by the discordant traffic sounds coming from the street. Suddenly the hope that has buoyed her now deserts her, and she sits down; he keeps his distance, occasionally looking over his shoulder, and offers her no encouragement at all. When he says, "You're thinking of marriage, aren't you?" it is clear to her that the same thought is not on his mind. Slightly embarrassed, slightly uncomfortable, yet trying to be self-possessed, she says simply, "Don't be mad." More eloquent than her words is her resolute move to the door. He tries to persuade her to stay, pointing out what is to him the overwhelming obstacles to their independent relationship. He asks for time to think about it, but as the imminent departure is in three days, time is hardly hers to give. However, Karuna feels betrayed that in this matter he should feel the need to have anything to think

about at all; to her his prevaricating is tantamount to a rejection. As she leaves, he pleads once more to give him time. Her acerbic response, "It's not time that you need, but something else," implies his spinelessness.

The two subsequent flashback sequences are anterior to this crucial one, and it is interesting that Ray chooses to present them after the end of the affair. The first is set on a tram, when Amitabh appears unbeknown to Karuna and saves her from the embarrassment of not having the money for her fare; the second is in a booth in a café. Both scenes are brief and light in substance, the intention being simply to indicate the strength of feeling between the two lovers. Presenting them after the end of the affair serves well to highlight Amitabh's weakness that has driven Karuna from him and offers a tellingly ironic perspective to what otherwise would have been an ordinary, happy sequence of events.

The transition from the first flashback back to the present is particularly effective. The camera is, as it were, at the foot of Amitabh's bed, his upper body filling the frame, his head turned to the left of the frame. Restlessly he turns his head to the right of the frame and finds himself looking, through the gap created by Karuna's having left the door ajar, at a portrait of Karuna on a wall in the living room—or rather, perhaps, he sees her looking from the portrait's frame at him. It is a moving cinematic moment. Evidently distressed by the memory still lingering in his mind, the camera focuses on him on the bed, follows him to the bathroom where he splashes water on his face, then goes with him into the living room and merges with the play of shadows made by the curtains tossing about in the breeze and lit only by the light of the moon. There is a shot of Karuna's shadow moving from side to side, seen under the door of her bedroom, asserting the closeness of her as a person, perhaps, to Amitabh, but in reality, nevertheless, a shadow. He accidentally knocks over a small vase and the sound brings Karuna from her bedroom

into the living room. Again Amitabh tries to talk to her and again she lets his words bounce off her, almost as though she were dallying with him. He still wants to know if she is happy, and as long as he does not know . . . She interrupts with a gentle touch of sarcasm, "You will never find peace in life?" As close as she gets to revealing her stance, she says, "All right, then. Let it remain a mystery."

There is now a distinct change in the atmospherics of the film as the setting becomes external and the dramatic intensity appears to be relieved. The three set off in the jeep for a picnic, but what might seem to be the commonplace pleasure of a drive through the hills becomes, for Amitabh, a matter of escalating tension. The conversation starts off innocently enough, but talk of love and marriage—mostly by Bimal—is a little too personal for Amitabh. Moreover, it becomes evident that Amitabh is uncomfortable looking at Karuna sitting beside her husband. Thoughts of what might have been are obviously causing him emotional pain. The director's interest in all of this, quite naturally, is the effect on Amitabh, and, apart from the few point-of-view shots from behind Karuna and Bimal, for the most part the camera concentrates on his face. Although the facial contortions would seem to suggest nausea more than emotional strain, it does become clear that the dramatic intensity, diluted perhaps by the greater openness of the setting and the buoyant geniality, has by no means been obviated.

As Karuna had maintained her distance from Amitabh in the house by refusing to engage with him in anything beyond small talk, her remoteness is given a physical dimension during the outing. When Bimal takes a tin can and goes off to look for water, Amitabh urgently appeals to her to leave Bimal and go off with him, pleading that she cannot be happy with Bimal as he drinks too much. The narrow hillside road separating them is enough to underline the distance Karuna is maintaining. When Amitabh first tried to initiate personal conversation with

Karuna the previous night, the endeavour was thwarted by a servant's concern about hot water, and this time the futility of his continued endeavour is underlined by a small but noisy convoy of army trucks passing between them and, when they have gone, Bimal's ever friendly arm on Amitabh's shoulder. After their lunch Amitabh makes one last bid. Bimal dozes off and Karuna moves away slightly to sit on some rocks overlooking a stream, plainly ignoring Amitabh's approach. He resorts to writing her a note on a paper serviette, telling her he will wait for her at the station that evening if only she decides to go with him. There is another innocent interruption, this time amusingly coming from Bimal, who has dozed off with a lit cigarette in his hand and wakes with a start when it burns down to his fingers.

There is a distinct element of poignancy in the last part of the film. Bimal drops Amitabh off near the station, and there is a long shot of Amitabh watching the jeep drive away into the distance, so visually emphasising the remoteness of Karuna from him. He makes his way to the station and buys his ticket; then there is a high shot, very effectively evoking a melancholy sense of solitariness. He sits down and waits in obvious anxiety, clinging to the faint hope that Karuna will peremptorily leave Bimal and come to him. The afternoon light merges into the dark of evening. Just before the train arrives, Karuna does appear, walking towards the camera from the top of the frame and setting up a potentially dramatic moment. However, Amitabh's joy is only momentary; she has not come for the romantic intention of elopement but for the mundane purpose of getting back the bottle of sleeping pills he had not returned to her the previous night.

Ray's command over the cinematic potentialities of his film is as acute here as it is in much of his better work. The basic story of *Kapurush* is adequately presented through the dialogue and action, but there are also more subtle realms of meaning to be discerned in what might be thought to be incidental dialogue. For example, much is made of the physical isolation of this

particular tea-planter and his wife and the social ramifications of that isolation. Before the point is openly made, it is implied very early in the film when Bimal comes into the garage to make a phone call and is told by the operator that there is no connection. Later that evening Karuna wistfully remarks that it has been ages since she saw a Bengali film. While this might be another indication of their isolation, another shade of meaning is added to it when she goes on to say to Bimal, "You never let me go to Calcutta." This could be taken as a condemnation of a mean husband, a view Amitabh would be quick to espouse; it could also suggest that Bimal is very protective of his wife. He does not take her himself, probably because his work is so demanding. Whatever the reason, Calcutta remains remote. There are a couple of pictures on the wall that hint at Karuna's artistic past, and Bimal boasts of her talent to Amitabh. But he also raises a question of the openness of their relationship in saying that he did not know that she was a painter until three years after they were married. Amitabh, who says he has not found a taste for alcohol, sits on a small glass of sherry throughout the entire evening, and yet the next day he accepts Bimal's offer of a share of his hip flask. After he splutters a little, having taken more than a liberal swig, Bimal proclaims with unwitting irony, "Now you are a man!" If drink makes men, it would seem that more than a swig from a hip flask would be needed by Amitabh.

The camera's care for faces also conveys a lot of underlying meaning. The look on the faces of Karuna and Amitabh when they so unexpectedly encounter one another is powerfully suggestive. Karuna's constant purpose in keeping her eyes averted from Amitabh, and Amitabh's occasional irresistible glance at her enhance the tension. That theirs was no everyday affair with its commonplace break-up is very clearly implied by the slightly extended shots of Amitabh alone in his room, sitting in the living room after dinner and the next day in the back of the jeep, quite clearly experiencing acute emotional discomfort.

There are also two moments of intriguing ambiguity. At the end of their encounter in the moonlit living room, Amitabh asks Karuna for some help in getting to sleep, and she brings him a small bottle of pills. She tells him not to take more than two. "And what if I do?" he asks, with a faint suggestion of melodrama but no inkling of defiance. Her reply is equivocal: "I don't think you will." She might be thinking that he has the good sense not to. She might also be thinking that he does not have the nerve. The ending of the film is to some extent predicated on this ambiguity. She wants the sleeping pills back, as she says, because of the difficulty involved in purchasing them locally. Again an ambiguity might be seen here with some wanting to believe that she is protecting him from himself and others happy simply to take her at her word. Amitabh gives her the bottle and the film ends as he watches her once again walk out of his life, this time against the background sound of the approaching train that will take him even further from her.

The atmospherics of the film are exceptionally well established. The opening is seen against the background of Ray's own steamy, languid music played by an almost lewd clarinet and saxophone. The first scene is the confined, cluttered garage where Amitabh's car is to be repaired. Confinement is a feature of the visual nature of the film and, by extension, a factor in its interpretation. From the garage floor the scene shifts to the proprietor's cramped office, not entirely removed from the workshop and slightly sub-framed within it. There is a sense of confinement later in the house, spacious as indeed it is, for the action is for the most part restricted to the proximity of Bimal. Even when Amitabh goes to his room, it too appears to have him confined as the camera moves about with him, always keeping him in close or medium close shot. Amitabh's hostel room is small and cluttered, and the atmosphere is palpably steamy; much of the time the large window is central to the frame, with rain falling lightly on the other side of it; this atmosphere is further enhanced by the

close shots of Karuna, revealing the perspiration glistening on her throat.

There are, of course, remissions. Despite the confinement of the jeep, the ride home is a gentle relief from the cramped garage. When, after his torrid night, Amitabh goes outside before breakfast, the contrast is striking as a vast and beautiful panorama greets his eyes. Bimal belittles its beauty, saying that after a year it becomes commonplace and boredom reigns. The wide openness is also complemented by loneliness in that the nearest neighbours are nineteen and a half miles away. Indeed, the outdoor shots offer an illusory promise, for the notion of restriction within apparent freedom is developed throughout the remainder of the film. It starts off with Amitabh cramped up in the back of the jeep as well as being cramped up in his private world of regret and remorse. It continues through the afternoon as his endeavours to establish dialogue with Karuna are frustrated.

It has to be said, though, that *Kapurush* lacks the intensity of the finer works that preceded it. Nevertheless, it is notable for its simple though slight story neatly and economically told. The film's strength lies in its subtlety, its creation of an atmosphere of emotional tension, and its excellent visual presentation, especially in the final sequence that so movingly highlights Amitabh's rejection and solitariness, keeping Karuna as the camera's focal point.

The other feature on the double bill, *Mahapurush*, is an altogether different kind of film. It is a lightly amusing satirical piece providing a laugh at that essentially Indian figure, the *baba* or holy man. Such men are often frauds, or at least that is how they are depicted in Ray's films[18] and the so-called

[18] Viz. *Jay Baba Felunath* and the reference to the con-man Bhabananda in *Sonar Kella*. More serious attacks on institutionalised religion are to be found in *Devi* and *Ganashatru*.

mahapurush[19] of this film, Birinchi Baba, is no exception. While religion in one form or another comes under scrutiny in a number of Ray's films, it has to be said that Ray was not naturally suited to comedy, with the possible exception of *Parash Pathar*.[20] This is not to say that he did not have a sense of humour, as there is incidental humour to be found in many of his films, such as *Shatranj Ke Khilari,* the two Felunath films, *Samapti* and *Aranyer Din Ratri*.[21] There are some quite funny moments in *Mahapurush*, but generally the humour is intellectual and perhaps a little dry. It should be said, however, that Charuprakash Ghosh's performance as Birinchi Baba is an exceptionally fine piece of comic acting.

The titles, in their print style and format, provide the only outward link to *Kapurush*. The titles are displayed over an arm throwing flowers from a basket, and as we reach the end of the sequence the camera pulls back to reveal two holy men in characteristic robes in the doorway of a train. As the camera pulls back further we see a large crowd gathered at a station. Over the crowd the elder of the two holy men is throwing flowers; the younger is holding the basket of flowers, his face radiating complete devotion to the other, evidently his master. The crowd is demonstrably reverential; as the train moves out

[19] The word denotes a saint or a man with a lofty soul.

[20] It may well be claimed that *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* are comedies. Their worth as such is discussed in Chapter 9. Here it may simply be noted that both these films depend more on clowning for their humour than on anything more subtle and refined.

[21] Comedy is largely lacking in serious Indian cinema generally. Mrinal Sen made no comedy worth the name after the superb *Bhuvan Shome,* regarded on some criteria as his most successful film. Ritwik Ghatak made only *Ajantrik* that might be called a comedy, and apart from *Mandi* Shyam Benegal has steered clear of comedy (although there are some very funny moments in *Trikal*). No comedy is to be found in the filmographies of Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Buddhadeb Dasgupta or Goutam Ghose, to name just a few of India's leading independent filmmakers.

of the station there is a medium shot of the holy baba's foot generously extended to allow the faithful to enrich themselves with the blessing of touching it. Heard over all this is music that is rather tuneless and monotonous, evoking the mechanical repetition of mantras in the baba's concept of prayer and of the quaint discipline of the circular movement of the hands that will be seen to be the distinguishing motif of his 'teaching'.

The story is simple, even if highly improbable (although improbability may be quite consonant with satire) and tells of the threat to an incipient marriage proposal by the advent of a miraculous holy man as old as the world and the religious hysteria which he temporarily provokes. Satya is the young man who wants to marry Buchki, the daughter of a recently widowed lawyer, Gurupada Mitra, who meets Birinchi Baba[22] by chance on the train returning from Varanasi. In fact, he has also been to Vrindaban,[23] trying to find the strength that apparently left him when his wife died. Birinchi Baba who, before Gurupada's own eyes orders the sun to rise, provides that strength in an instant and so wins the undying faith and devotion of the innocent lawyer (though some might see as oxymoronic the term 'innocent lawyer').

The scene changes from the train to a flat in Calcutta where two friends, Paramartha and Nibaran, are playing chess while a third, Nitai, bewails his sorry state of financial affairs. There is an indication that the now established Birinchi Baba will somehow come into their lives, as Nibaran suggests—poker-faced but obviously tongue-in-cheek—that Nitai go to Jagannath Ghat to see one Mirchi Baba,[24] who claims to be able to take

[22] 'Birinchi' is another name for Brahma, the Lord of Creation. The name might enhance the baba's claim to agelessness.

[23] Varanasi and Vrindaban are important places of Hindu pilgrimage.

[24] *Mirchi* means 'chili'. The baba apparently insists that his disciples eat chilies (are there many Indians who don't eat chilies?) in order to keep themselves in good health.

the faithful back to the year 1914, buy iron at the contemporary price, and then come back—with the iron—to 1965 and sell it at the current price. It is then that Satya enters the room, full of gloom with the news that his would-be betrothed, Buchki, daughter of Gurupada Mitra, has fallen under the influence of a baba who is staying in their house and is about to take *diksha* or initiation into the religious life, so forsaking the world along with what might have been her marriage with Satya.

Satya, as it transpires, has not been an ideal wooer, having delayed his visit to his beloved that morning (the laundry did not have his trousers ready the previous day, when Buchki and her father got back) and, while she was away, he wrote her only one letter, containing seven lines, six of which were plagiarised from poets. Given her noticeable aversion to Birinchi Baba on their first encounter, it would seem likely that her 'intention' to take *diksha* is a simple ruse to punish Satya for his lack of appropriate punctiliousness. Later she will admit this to him, fearful that the baba may be having more influence over her life than she would care to allow and pointing out that Satya's future joy is dependent on the removal of the baba from their house. This is ultimately achieved by a mock fire alarm caused by smoke without fire.

The comedy arises naturally out of the nature of the two frauds, especially Birinchi Baba, but there are some very funny moments centring on the comic potential of his acolyte. Basic to it all is the plausible absurdity of their claims: that is to say, what they claim to be is quite incredible, yet it is asserted in such a manner that their many followers, including well-educated professional people, are easily persuaded to believe it. Foremost among these claims is that of antiquity. Birinchi Baba claims to have picked up his acolyte in an ancient Babylonian market-place. Before that he was at the foundation of the city of Varanasi and had been around even before then. There is an amusing banality in his manner of reference to that which is historically

momentous. Moreover, he drops famous names like those of chums at a club. He was consulted by Manu,[25] was acquainted with the great philosopher, Shankara, and knew Gautama[26] when he was a boy. He counselled Tulsidas[27] ("I made him become Raja Mansingh when he had finished writing the *Ramayana* – he needed to enjoy life."), enjoyed philosophical disputation with Plato, knew Jesus (whose life, he assures us, was not 'cruci-fiction' but 'cruci-fact') and, more recently, was an adviser to Einstein. On a more mundane level, he claims to have known Satya in a previous life, having met him at the *shraddha*[28] of Jagat Seth's mother ("You were known as Motiram then").

Also basic to the comedy is the high-sounding vacuousness of his discourses. Everything he says is patent absurdity wrapped in apparent erudition. Nibaran describes him quite perceptively: "He's an excellent actor and he understands mass psychology. He's well educated and has an amazing memory. He has imagination and presence of mind." And as we can see, to our amusement, he possesses remarkable audacity.

Another source of comedy is the quirkiness of their forms. It is on the train at the start of the film that we see Birinchi Baba 'causing' the sun to rise. Then there is their discipline of pointing the two forefingers at each other and moving one clockwise and the other anti-clockwise, simultaneously. At the preordained time for the homily to come to an end (usually seven o'clock) the clock strikes and Birinchi Baba flings his arms above him crying incongruously "Tempora!" followed by shouts of "Om!";[29]

[25] Traditionally the giver of the legal basis on which Hindu social theory is founded, *The Laws of Manu.*

[26] The Buddha.

[27] To whom is traditionally ascribed the authorship of the *Ramayana*, one of the two great epics of India.

[28] Post-funerary celebration.

[29] The sacred syllable, the enunciation of which is an expression of holiness.

the faithful, led by the acolyte, pick up the cry of "Om!" while Birinchi Baba adds to each utterance such things as 'nibus', 'niverous' and 'nipotent'. He then suddenly becomes catatonic and is carried from the room in his 'holy trance'.

We laugh also at their barefaced hypocrisy, such as when Nitai asks the baba to help him find a get-rich-quick scheme and Birinchi sternly berates him, telling him that there is no way to make money easily, yet no one could be making money more easily than Birinchi Baba and his acolyte. Their fraudulence is just as blatant. There is a scene showing the two godmen in their room, out of costume, smoking, a horse-racing form guide on the table, film music playing on the radio. The acolyte is wearing an extra pair of arms, for tonight Birinchi has promised that he will bring the first of his divine friends to the meeting – none less than Mahadeva himself, the God Shiva.[30] The acolyte's delicately feminine dance gestures are hilarious as is their eventual getaway when the 'fire' breaks out, not before having stolen all the women's handbags and purses.

We might also note the venality of Ganesh, the profiteering medium between Gurupada and Birinchi. The ready gullibility of Birinchi's audience, dependent on the godman's plausibility, is also amusing. Even the educated among them are intellectually vulnerable, such as the lawyer who describes Plato to the man beside him as the great Roman astrologer. There is also a lot of humour based on language, such the suffixes for "Om" noted above, and puns, which cannot easily, if at all, be rendered in the subtitles.

However, the film is cheapened somewhat by unnecessary artificial comedy. Professor Nandi, played by Santosh Dutta - who would be a constant spring of mirth in all the four young people's films some years later[31]—has to rely here for laughs on

[30] The god of destruction in the Hindu triad with Brahma (creation) and Vishnu (preservation).

[31] See Chapter 9.

the cheap device of a speech impediment.[32] When Satya comes to report to his friends the latest development in his love life, he adopts quite unaccountably a feminine gait and feminine gestures. It is as though the lily of the real humour is being gilded by contrivance.

Ray offers two quaint gimmicks. The term is not intended to be disparaging as the gimmicks themselves are appropriate and the first of them is quite delightful. The first is a display of rows of framed portraits to help Nibaran explain ostensibly to the others but actually to the audience who each character in Gurupada's family is and how they relate to one another. It is a clever and entertaining device. The second is a freeze-frame to allow Satya to continue with his narrative of the morning's events. Both devices occur relatively early in the film, and nothing like them occurs again. This isolation, as they are not part of any formal design, unfortunately makes them seem gratuitous.

The film is generally tightly constructed, although one wonders about the need for the Professor Nandi sequence. The only scenes that may be said to be drawn out are the Birinchi ones, and they enjoy the saving grace of well-sustained comic acting. The performances of the two rogues are exceptionally good, while the restrained realist portrayals of Nitai and Nibaran maintain, to whatever extent is possible, a balance of credibility.

The film has some memorable visual aspects. The shifting of the Baba's 'experience' to an outhouse is cinematically effective as a change from a now too familiar space, and the fire ritual that is held there is, in its modest way, quite spectacular, with the absurdity being maintained by a cut to Satya's eyes through the window louvres. Syntactically there is a nice touch in the suggestion of fire before the climax brought about by mock fire. Related to this, obviously, is the triumphant shot of the three revealers of the charlatans enjoying a different kind of smoke—

[32] Just as inexplicably Ray gives a speech impediment to the ranger in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. See Chapter 4.

Paramartha and his cigarette, Nibaran and his cigar and Nitai and his bidi. It is also slightly amusing to compare the last shot, which sees the two con-men running off into the distance, with the similarly constructed last shot of *Kapurush*, which saw the walking away of Karuna from Amitabh, creating, of course, a melancholy conclusion to that film and, we might add, one much more sublime.

Chidiakhana ('The Zoo', 1967) is probably the most maligned of all of Satyajit Ray's films—at least by the few who have seen it. However, remote as it is from Ray's better work, it is not necessarily the worst of his films. *Chidiakhana* is technically accomplished and bears the visual signs of a competent filmmaker; the story, by the very popular detective story writer, Saradindu Banerjee, is interesting enough, and the characters are well presented, particularly the detective Byomkesh Baksi, played by the celebrated Uttam Kumar. In all it is an entertaining piece, but it might well have been made by any one of a number of filmmakers not blessed with the genius of the man who gave us, let us say, *Charulata* and the Apu trilogy.

The structure of the film is much the same as the format adhered to by Saradindu and which was normative in Ray's own Feluda stories.[33] Thus, in *Chidiakhana* there is a brief section introducing the detective and his constant companion in something of a private situation (although, in its talk about the inconstancy and impurity of love in many literary contexts, it offers some incidental signs for the drama which is to follow). In Ray's own stories—and, of course, his two Feluda films—the two stalwarts are Felunath Mitter and his younger cousin, Topse; in Saradindu's it is Byomkesh Baksi and his friend, Ajit Chakravarti. Some entertaining though inconsequential matter will be interrupted by a phone call or a knock on the door from a prospective client, who will then give some idea of the nature

[33] Ray began writing these stories two years before he made *Chidiakhana*. See Chapter 9.

of his particular problem, whetting the appetite of the detective and his assistant and laying the basis of the plot for the reader or viewer. The greater part of the story or film is given over to the detective's investigation of the mystery and his various endeavours to reach a conclusion. There is a finale, which usually takes the form of an assembly of all the key characters in the case being addressed by the detective.[34] Here he offers the fruits of his inquiry, giving his reasons for suspecting this one or that, discarding the suspicions that could not be substantiated and setting forth his case against the one whom he has concluded must be the culprit. There is a danger of an element of didacticism creeping into this last, essentially verbose, section; it might also be seen in its summariness to be something of an easy way of bringing the story to a conclusion. The film, then, is little more than an unfolding of events, and while such a simple narrative form does nothing to weaken *Sonar Kella* or *Jay Baba Felunath*, in *Chidiakhana* there is very little to season this fundamental simplicity. What little extra interest there is comes from the characterisations, and even these are, for the most part, clichéd and sometimes overstated presentations of the bizarre and eccentric.

The fundamental narrative ingredient of *Chidiakhana* is a combination of a film, an actress and a song, thus representing an attempt at popular appeal which is reinforced by the appearance of the matinee idol, Uttam Kumar, in the major role. The plot emanates out of the curiosity of a man to know the identity of an actress; more specifically, whether she is, in fact, staying in an ashram he runs not far out of Calcutta. Nisanath Sen presents his card to Byomkesh and we learn that he runs two stalls in the city's New Market—one for flowers and the other for dairy goods, the produce of his ashram, Golam

[34] We might note, though, that this is not the case in the film version of *Sonar Kella*.

(or 'rose') Colony. He comes to Byomkesh with what seems like a mysteriously simple problem for an eminent detective: he wants to know the name of the film in which a certain song—*What do you know about love?*—was sung, as well as the name of the actress who sang it. His curiosity is prompted, as he relates, by his having heard the song sung recently at Golam Colony just as he remembered it being performed in the film some eight years earlier. Thus, the first question of the mystery is established: is a film actress, who, it soon transpires, suddenly disappeared from cinema eight years ago, actually living incognito in Nisanath Sen's ashram? If in fact she is, then her reason presents itself as a matter to titillate the viewer's curiosity.

Byomkesh agrees to visit the ashram the next day as a preliminary to sorting out Nisanath Sen's small and seemingly inconsequential mystery. There is really no compelling reason for him to go disguised as a Japanese tourist, but just for the sake of maintaining anonymity and not raising suspicions he adopts this persona. Convincingly necessary or not, the disguise does make for a degree of amusement, at least for a little while, but the artifice is played out well beyond its effectiveness and ceases to be funny long before it is done with.

Byomkesh's visit to Rose Colony does provide an opportunity to meet the rather special kind of people who live there. We learn that Nisanath Sen is a retired judge with a troublesome conscience, having sent some fourteen men to the gallows, and that his Rose Colony, providing a livelihood for a number of social misfits, is his endeavour to salve his troubled soul.[35] The inhabitants of the colony are introduced to the Japanese visitor one by one, and while our curiosity might be excited by their odd assortment of backgrounds, there are only three women, none of whom will be seen to resemble the mysterious actress.

[35] A similar character appears in Ray's 1987 story, "Peril in Paradise" (Gopa Majumdar, tr., *The Complete Adventures of Feluda,* Vol. II, Penguin, 2005).

Identifying the film and the actress proves easy. Byomkesh visits one of the numerous people in Calcutta who have an encyclopaedic knowledge of cinema and obtains his information straightaway. His informant even manages to arrange a screening of the relevant excerpt of the film for him; hence we see the face of the actress and may try to fit it with one of the pictures Byomkesh, as an unrestrained Japanese tourist photographer, has taken of the women of the ashram. However, the narrative takes an unexpected turn, throwing up a much bigger and more urgent mystery than that which has occupied our detective so far. Nisanath Sen is murdered one night while talking on the phone with Byomkesh.

The film now follows the direct line of investigating a murder, and Byomkesh, having discarded his Japanese disguise, returns to Rose Colony to question the residents. Various distractions to a smooth investigation are thrown up, such as the fact that Nisanath Sen's 'wife' is in fact still married to a man whom the judge had sentenced to death; Lal Singh, the rightful husband, had successfully appealed against the sentence and is now due for release. Then there are the motor spare parts that keep turning up at Nisanath's house and the murder of a mute boy at the colony. These turn out to be some of the detective mystery's obligatory red herrings, but do for a time offer interesting food for thought. Cinematically it is here that the film becomes tedious: there has been too much talk, especially from Byomkesh; too much disintegrated interviewing, both by Byomkesh and his Japanese alter ego; and too much concentration of place, particularly Rose Colony.

At last, but too late, there is a refreshing change of scene and some regeneration of interest. Byomkesh decides to follow one of his suspects to Calcutta. Again he opts for disguise—this time as a Kabuliwallah[36]—and now a disguise makes good sense

[36] An Afghan merchant.

as he certainly could not afford to be recognised by this particular suspect. The sequence is well-shot and well-cut, but spoiled by something which seems quite out of character. The suspect leads Byomkesh to a house in Calcutta. Byomkesh, or the Kabuliwallah, contrives to bump into the man and, in the ensuing confusion, pick from his pocket the key to the flat. Then, no longer in disguise, he returns to the flat to search it. He encounters a young Anglo-Indian woman from the same building just inside the entrance. They civilly exchange greetings, and then Byomkesh suddenly seizes her, holding his hand over her mouth, and whisks her into the room. He ties a handkerchief around her face—more in the style of a bandit's mask than as a gag—pulls a revolver from his belt and threateningly signals her to be quiet. There is a moment of diluted tension as she is called by someone from the other side of the door, and then Byomkesh, having searched some drawers and presumably found something useful, asks her three simple questions and lets her go. The sequence is jarring in that one cannot help wondering why somebody with Byomkesh's consummate wit and charm had to resort to imitation of an American gangster movie cliche.

Eventually the lies are sorted from the truth in the suspects' stories, the actions are weighed and the mistakes are identified, and Byomkesh calls all involved in the mystery to a meeting, accompanied by the police inspector. There is really no cinematic interest in this concluding scene, its only value to the audience lying in its naming of the culprit—who turns out to be no great surprise—and the offering of reasons to support the final allegation.

Some years later Satyajit Ray would go on to make two superb detective films, in no way to be compared with *Chidiakhana,* while *Chidiakhana*, entertaining, lightweight diversion that it is, is far better left to survive within the pages of Saradindu's writing.

These films from Ray's first ten years as a filmmaker are odds and ends in that each stands out as a flawed one of a kind in

Ray's overall filmography. *Jalsaghar* might have been an excellent film if not for its imperfections in form; the others are, simply, lesser films. While the double bill is well made, it is nevertheless a comparatively negligible work given the limitations of the subject matter of its two component pieces. The adult fable, *Parash Pathar*, suffers for the tension between 'adult' and 'fable'; by the middle of the film 'adult' wins out and the work is thereby minimised. Indeed, it is only the superb performance of Tulsi Chakravarti that makes the film at all memorable. The attempt at *film noir* in *Abhijan* might have made a different impact without its central miscasting and with some unrestrained cutting of its excessive length. *Chidiakhana* is notable for its talk and cleverness and a degree of eccentricity, but fails to give cinematic value to these elements. Yet it can be said that in all these films there are some obvious marks of a master filmmaker; however, in the other films of the same period the strengths are integrated, while in the odds and ends something seems to be missing: *Parash Pathar* lacks the substance with which to continue the promise of the earlier part of the film into what follows; *Jalsaghar* lacks a sufficiently acute balance between its narrative and its music; to counter the memorable moments in *Abhijan* there are sequences that suggest that Ray is groping for direction; the technical assurance of both *Kapurush* and *Mahapurush* is compromised by the limited weightiness of the former and the shallowness of the latter; and *Chidiakhana* is too much dependent on the form of its literary prototype. It is reasonable to suggest that there is a sense in these works of Ray trying to find something different while not in full mastery of the direction he is taking. It cannot be said that they are in any way a sign of the filmmaker's creative limitation, for during the same period, it must be remembered, he made the Apu trilogy, *Devi* and *Charulata*. Indeed, the odds and ends would not be an indication of the rest of Ray's career.

4 The Urban Middle Class: *Kanchanjungha, Mahanagar, Nayak, Aranyer Din Ratri*

There is very little of the city in the first seven films of Satyajit Ray. His third film, *Parash Pathar,* is set in Calcutta, as is some of *Aparajita* and much of *Apur Sansar,* but generally rural Bengal is dominant in these early works. The eighth film, *Kanchanjungha* (1962), is set in the hill station of Darjeeling, but its total concern is with a group of middle-class Calcuttans on vacation, and its interest is as bourgeois as its characters. *Mahanagar* ("The Big City", 1963) focuses on a lower middle-class family in Calcutta. The characters of *Nayak* ("The Hero", 1966) are from the Calcutta middle-class, for the most part travelling on a train from Calcutta to Delhi. Like *Kanchanjungha, Aranyer Din Ratri* ("Days and Nights in the Forest", 1969) is a film about middle-class Calcuttans on vacation away from Calcutta, in this case in the Palamau region of Bihar. All of these films are, of course, worthy of study in their own right, while much of the social values and philosophy emanating from them might be of particular interest as a

preliminary to a study of the three great Calcutta films of the 1970s.[1]

The films prior to *Kanchanjungha* were based on stories by eminent Bengali writers—Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Parashuram, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee and Rabindranath Tagore. However, *Kanchanjungha* is significant in that Ray for the first time made a film on a story of his own. The film would probably be inconceivable in black and white, and is the first Ray film to be made in colour, a medium he used for only eleven of his twenty-nine feature films.

Kanchanjungha is set in the small hill resort of Darjeeling and focuses on one family group of Calcuttans on holiday there. On the surface the film might seem to be structured in a way that resembles the now all too familiar TV soap opera format, though it must be stressed that the comparison goes no further than this, for in fact the film is based on a very carefully devised structure with a balanced and logical continuity, not a random assortment of somehow connected episodes. Nevertheless, the series of brief, related episodes has the salutary effect of diffusing the microcosmic intensity of the film, so lending interest and variety in a confined and concentrated setting and set of circumstances.

The delightful title cards, beautifully drawn and coloured like pictures out of a child's story book and emphasising the simplicity of the hill people, are an indication that on the immediate level, at least, *Kanchanjungha* is not a profound and complex film. Its simple basis is the holiday in Darjeeling of Indranath Roy and his family: his wife, his elder daughter and son-in-law and their small daughter, his younger daughter and his son. Attached to this nucleus of characters is Indranath's brother-in-law, Jogadish, and one Mr. Banerjee, a prospective suitor to Manisha, Indranath's younger, unmarried daughter.

[1] *Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*. See Chapter 5.

The young Ashok Ray and his uncle Shiv Shankar meet up with the Roys, the uncle having some time back been the tutor to their son Anil, now a rather silly young man who seems to hover around the outskirts of the film in his pursuit of young women. Central to the meagre plot (it is after all a film of ideas rather than a story) is the Manisha-Mr Banerjee connection and Indranath's hope for a betrothal. More significant than her father's hope, however, is the grave concern of her mother, Labanya, regarding her daughter's future happiness in such an arranged marriage, and from this Ray enables us to infer something of the difficulties of her own marriage. The issue of marital happiness is further highlighted by the apparent downturn in relations between Anima, the elder daughter, and her husband Shankar. All of this transpires in one afternoon in much the same time that it takes the film to run.

Pertinent to so much of the film is the notion of distance or remoteness, which is manifest in the film's physical environment, while the relations between its various characters and its underlying philosophy provide it with a substance in which interest is well maintained throughout. For most people the paramount pleasure of a visit to Darjeeling is the splendid view one gets of the magnificent and imperious Mt Kanchanjungha, the third highest mountain in the world.[2] However, while one may go to Darjeeling as often as one likes, a clear view of Kanchanjungha can never be assured as the mountain, like an aristocratic woman in purdah, may choose to remain behind the curtain of cloud and mist that has been concealing it—on this occasion for the previous seventeen days. It is now the last day of the Roys' holiday, bright and sunny, and yet the majestic Himalayan peak still remains unseen. As long as the mountain is obscured and remote to the senses, it is, at least for the moment, unknowable—a condition that underlies so much of

[2] Standing at 8,586 metres it comes after Everest (8,850 metres) and K2 (8,611 metres).

the relationships between the characters we meet on this one afternoon in Darjeeling.

Ray very effectively enhances the notions of obscured understanding between his characters by simple visual articulation of the distance between them. His shots are composed so that very often we do not see any two characters in close physical proximity to one another. Two characters may encounter one another on the road around the hill, yet the shot is composed so that their dialogue occurs over what seems to be a less than natural gap. When Ashok and the Rai Bahadur,[3] Indranath Roy, encounter one other on the road, the physical gap between them, initially indicating Ashok's awe of Indranath, readily underlines the generational distinction as well as the unequivocal class barrier that separates the two. More subtly, when Manisha comes across Ashok on the same hill road, the gap then may be seen to signify the same feeling of class distinction but also the propriety in maintaining an initial formality in social relations, leaving open the possibility of the gap in time being narrowed. Of course, Manisha and Mr Banerjee are seen on a number of occasions walking beside one another along the hill road, but even here Ray is careful to show that proximity does not necessarily indicate closeness. Manisha is shown to be content to simply be present and be talked to, often hanging back a pace or two behind Banerjee, while he—pompous egotist that he is—declaims more to the world at large than to the girl at his side. Most significant is the composition of the shot in which Indranath and Labanya broach the subject—they do not really come to terms with it—of arranged marriage. They are at a lookout point overlooking a vast valley; Labanya is seated, Indranath stands behind or beside her. He, like Banerjee whom he so admires, declaims rather than engages, and much of his opinionated bombast is directed out across the valley, not to his wife. When he asks a rhetorical question about their own marriage,

[3] A title conferred by the erstwhile British government of India.

the look on Labanya's face as she now gazes out over the valley proclaims the vast chasm that keeps them from true intimacy with one another. Even on the absurd level, the distance between the silly son Anil and a would-be female conquest is easily indicated by the restaurant table between them both, a pet dog or an engaging book, Anil's own camera, or simply a preferred rival.

The nature of these distances between characters needs to be looked at in some detail. The central relationship is the long-established marriage of Indranath and Labanya. Ray tells us nothing, really, about this marriage but he shows us a great deal. The first time we see Indranath, dressed superbly in a Western suit, he is doing nothing other than taking the air, smoking a cigar and chatting inconsequentially with an English tourist. He is steeped in self-assurance and self-satisfaction. The first time we see Labanya she is packing in anticipation of their departure later in the day. As she performs what Indranath would undoubtedly describe as woman's work, we sense something of the drudgery which has characterised her marriage. Her face is drawn; a smile would seem to be as remote as a fully visible Kanchanjungha. Basically, Labanya's role in the film is to express anxiety on behalf of her younger daughter. While Indranath is overjoyed at the prospect of Banerjee proposing to marry Manisha—not only does Banerjee come from the right social stable but he holds excellent business credentials as well—Labanya is fearful that a marriage imposed on the girl will be detrimental to her future happiness. There is nothing at all to indicate that Labanya knows much about happiness and we might well assume that she is really worried that her daughter might have as meaningless a marriage as the one to which she was once condemned by her father.

The marriage of Indranath and Labanya has degenerated through an imaginable but imperceptible web of subjective complexities into a relationship of mere routine and dull habit.

Less subtle, however, is the marital shakiness of Anima and Shankar. Ray visually portrays the gap between them in three kinds of composition: at first Shankar is still in bed after his siesta, while Anima is outside seeing off their little girl, who is going riding, and then in their room sitting at her dressing table; a little later, near the Mall and with a tiff brewing, they agree to go their own ways; they meet up again later at a small children's park where they start to explore their dissension, Anima seated and Shankar standing or moving about. Gradually they do come closer together, especially when Anima agrees that she can destroy the letters she has been receiving from Shankar's rival. And then, when it is obvious that the love they have for their little girl is far stronger than anything that may divide them, one wonders what all the fuss has been about—an extramarital affair that all but ended quite some time back and some disagreeable habits that the husband is willing to try to minimise.

None of this is of any great depth and borders even on the insignificant. Ray's interest, however, is not in the intricacies of marital disharmony but in the mere fact of it. The dialogue is therefore very carefully written and, in its economy, remarkably effective in that most of what we learn about these two marriages is by our own inference rather than by being informed. Ray's skill as a filmmaker lies in the relative ease of the viewer's inference, which is facilitated by the clear characterisation, especially in the Indranath-Labanya sequence, and, as discussed earlier, by the spatial arrangement of the composition. In the Shankar-Anima drama a third party, the little girl, is used to underline the possibility of reconciliation in the presently unstable marriage. The several shots of the child riding her pony, alone, are quite touching once the point is realised that all the people who ought to love her so much are too preoccupied with their own interests to be more than formally concerned with her. Particularly poignant are the close shots of her face as she surveys her troubled

parents from the back of her pony; it is a look that reflects the child's innocent helplessness as well as a determined optimism tinged with just a shadow of doubt. She is, ultimately, the filmmaker's clear indication that her parents might see beyond their personal and selfish interests and at last make a real endeavour to live as a happy family.

The Manisha-Banerjee sequences are a little different, in that they are, comparatively, rather verbose. The style, of course, is similar, with the essentialised dialogue and the composition militating against any obvious notion of intimacy. Banerjee, while being noticeably gentler and more polished than Indranath, is, however, very much like him in his propensity to hold forth, in his unmistakable burgeoning pomposity and in his fondness to talk about himself. He is, nevertheless, perceptive enough to recognise that all his self-projection has failed to impress the girl he has been trying to woo, and on this realisation he is gracious enough to retire. Indranath, on the other hand, does not have the perspicacity to read character as clearly as Banerjee does, nor does he have the grace to admit what he interprets as defeat—his underlying arrogance and bullishness preclude such a virtue.

The remaining member of the Roy family represents one of the less commendable features of the film. Anil is a slight character, too silly to be taken seriously and too clichéd to be funny. All he does is run around Darjeeling with his box camera, in pursuit of eligible young women and, unsurprisingly, having to undergo the indignity of rejection as the cost of his fatuousness. His inability to establish a relationship might be seen as sad were it not for his inanity. The film would certainly not be any the less for his excision from it; indeed, it might actually be magnified by the obviation of what might be seen as an annoyance. He does, perhaps, provide in his flippancy a contrast to the infinitely more weighty problems faced by his sisters, and there is some value in his implied contrast to his

near contemporary, Ashok. Ashok has a degree in history, is urbane and well-mannered, works hard for little reward and is prepared to realise advancement in life by his own efforts rather than through personal favour. However, while Ashok's character stands for itself without the need for contrast to the crass Anil, it is nevertheless disturbing to think that Ashok could, perhaps, end up like his humble uncle while Anil will almost certainly hold a lucrative position in one or more of Indranath's companies.

Labanya's brother Jogadish, a widower, is happily detached from all the other characters as he pursues his personal passion for birds. In attempting to share this passion with Indranath, he is rebuffed by his brother-in-law's philistinism in asking whether the bird Jogadish so much wants to see can be eaten. Jogadish is not, it would seem, an essential character, but he carries some interest, nevertheless. His role is not as a functionary but as a kind of support: he is happy to tend to the meeting between Banerjee and Manisha when it might appear to be intruded on by Ashok, and he offers tactful yet genuine support to his sister Labanya when she voices her concern for Manisha to him. However, his significance really lies in his disengagement from all the other characters while being there if any of them should need him, as it were. His independence is articulated through his ardent bird-watching which, from time to time, seems a little comical as he rushes off after this one or that. However, his ability to think and marvel beyond the mundanity in which most of the other characters are indeed trapped is made evident in the sequence he has with Ashok, in which he expresses his profound concern for the future of birds in the context of nuclear testing. It could be suggested that his distance from the others lends him a degree of neutrality, and so it is of particular interest when Ray consciously makes a point of showing us his obvious approval when it would seem that Manisha's interests might lie with Ashok, or at least someone nearer her age.

The question of age or generation identity is of considerable interest in *Kanchanjungha* as it is in so many of Ray's films[4]. While Indranath speaks proudly of "family tradition", the concept does not seem to be taken up with any degree of alacrity by the ensuing generation. Manisha may not question her father, even less take issue with him on anything, but she clearly does not share his idea of a good husband for her or the tradition that would authorise him to arrange her marriage. The ingrained mendicancy in Ashok's uncle, quite unabashed at the idea of humbly seeking a favour from a man of influence such as Indranath Roy for the sake of getting Ashok a job, contrasts markedly with Ashok's own philosophy of the value of proceeding wherever he may be going under his own steam. Underlying these inter-generational tensions is an overwhelmingly important fact of Indian history: the independence from foreign rule that had been achieved only fifteen years before the relatively mundane and trifling events of this one afternoon in the resort town of Darjeeling.

Indranath is a product of British India, the old India. His dress and the affectation of a stick and cigars mark him immediately as Westernised. His fondness for cricket, also an affectation, preferring it for its elegance over football, is less a sporting predilection than a means of identifying with a race for which he has a sycophantic admiration. He is indebted to the British for his title of *Rai Bahadur*, a bauble in which he takes immeasurable pride. He is eager to greet English tourists with a formal "Good afternoon", and the sight of one, a very elderly man being led on horseback by a local, prompts him to express his thanks to God that there are still some sahibs left, marvelling that "they remind us how to keep fit in our old age". Ashok, on

[4] Ray is quoted by Marie Seton: "My films . . . are all concerned with the new versus the old." *Portrait of a Director. Satyajit Ray,* Penguin India, 2003, p.57. The comment was made early in his career, yet it does significantly apply to most of his twenty-nine films.

the other hand, is a product of Independent India, the new India. His education in history, we may assume, lends some depth to his grave expression while listening to Indranath sounding off contemptuously against those misguided classmates of his who fought for India's freedom and found themselves in jail. "What good could they do there?" he wonders aloud, while recalling his early business successes at the time when freedom fighters were being incarcerated. Ray paints Indranath clearly as a man who has progressed on the back of a foreign power, standing aside from the patriotic endeavours of his own countrymen in order to win some advantage from his imperial masters. We are given no indication that he has ever had to struggle for anything in his life, and it is clearly a victory for Ashok to stand up to him in declaring that he intends to make something of himself through self-reliance rather than favour. This effective rejection of Indranath's offer of patronage astonishes the haughty anglophile, used as he must be to people fawning on him with gushing gratitude. Ashok's assertion that he can do it alone without the help of a wealthy patron must be, to Indranath, an expression of waywardness, insolence and even—given his antediluvian values—insubordination.

In this encounter between the old and the young, then, there are clear indications of generation conflict as well as suggestions of colonialist-nationalist dissension. There are also hints of class tensions expressed in Indranath's earlier abrasiveness in his meeting with Ashok's uncle, a former tutor to Indranath's son, and in his unconcealed scorn for Ashok's earnings of fifty rupees a month from giving tuition. But there is also a class divide—as well as a somewhat more insidious regional divide—between the Calcutta tourists and the local hill people. For the most part this distinction is merely visual and consists in the obvious appearance of the two groups—Calcutta men in Western clothes and women in fine saris, locals in tawdry working dress—and in the fact that we see no evidence of interaction between them despite their

necessary intermingling as they move about the town and along the hillside road. We might also note the locals employed to run alongside the ponies hired by tourists, not all as young as Anima and Shankar's little girl. Towards the end of their walk Manisha and Banerjee are coming down the hill just as a group of local men with a pack of heavily laden donkeys pass them on their way up, the donkeys' bells clanging and the men talking loudly; Manisha and Banerjee seem not even to notice them. At the time the film was made there was an incipient unrest among the people of the hills, unhappy and growingly resentful of their perceived neglect by governments in Delhi and Calcutta, an unrest that would continue for many years. The distance Ray depicts between the tourists and the locals, the former seemingly oblivious of the latter, the latter tolerant of the former, is an eloquent expression of tension between the generally affluent visitors from the bustling cities and the humble, often impoverished people of the hills and their rugged and demanding way of life. The brief sample of pageantry of the police band performing in the Mall might recall something of British India in its tunes and style, but it might also suggest a hint of disciplined militancy in the distinctive hill people. There is also significance to be read into the appearance to Anima of a blind beggar, chanting his disability in English, who momentarily serves well the purpose of reminding us that there are worse predicaments for one to be in than that being suffered by her and Shankar. But particularly telling is the motif Ray employs of the little beggar boy. Dressed in rags and unwashed, the boy appears from time to time to pester for a few pennies people like Banerjee, whose nature it is to totally ignore him. One exceptionally expressive shot shows the boy in medium close-up simply observing the rich visitors, the look on his face offering the slightest of hints of the resentment that the hungry might reasonably direct at the selfish.

The central interest of the film is in Manisha. The major dialogue between Indranath and Labanya is about her, and before

we learn anything about the faltering marriage of Shankar and Anima, Shankar is expressing concern for his younger sister-in-law. While she is obviously more relaxed and happy in the company of Ashok, it cannot be said that he is for her the alternative to Mr Banerjee. Ray is not, in fact, matchmaking on Manisha's behalf but rather giving her the right to do that for herself. He is simply asserting her right to personal freedom. Once Banerjee has come to realise that he is not the man for her, he tells her, "You're free." After he turns and walks away from her, we see Manisha in a high shot watching him walk away, the height of the camera serving immediately to highlight the growing separation between them. The camera then comes back to eye level, facing Manisha who is looking past the camera towards the departing Banerjee. A horse suddenly gallops past Manisha, away from the camera, the sound of its hooves lingering long after the rider has gone out of the frame. All the other horses seen in the film have been ridden at a sedate pace, led or restrained by a local lackey. This unknown rider is free to go at his own pace, serving to highlight the fact that so, now, is Manisha.

When they first meet in the Mall, Manisha is obviously more comfortable with Ashok than she generally seems to be with Banerjee. She is relaxed and courteous without being diffident. Confidently she makes the first move towards him, putting him at ease in his obvious nervousness in the company of the daunting Indranath. They encounter each other again on the road a little later, and she seems to take pity on his loneliness. She asks him why he is alone and he replies that he does not know anyone in Darjeeling, as he is there not on holiday but on account of his mother's ill health. They catch up with one another again, and this time she is alone; he greets her with the same words with which she greeted him before: "What's the matter? Why are you alone?" It is this kind of balance in the dialogue, along with her being impressed at his guessing that

her subject is English, which indicates a line of sympathy between them. But there are also differences which they candidly tackle head-on, the basic one being their distinction in class. Understandably it concerns Ashok considerably more than Manisha. He first alludes to it a touch sarcastically, pointing out that she has problems that he does not have, and illustrates this by talk of matching shoes with saris, questions of etiquette and the rules of Western table manners. He asserts that she belongs to:

> . . . the class with money, with houses, cars. People who have no need to earn. Those who have gardens and gates with boards on them saying 'Beware of the Dog'.

He challenges the artificiality of formality:

> I knew you weren't really interested when you asked about my mother. You were merely being polite.

Ray is careful that the camera picks up his warm and engaging smile, thereby assuring us that he is not speaking from under the weight of some chip on his shoulder. He is being simply and genuinely frank.

When they meet on their last encounter, just after Manisha has been 'set free', she says, "I hope your mother will get better soon." She hastens to add "I'm not being just polite." We might note that her freedom from the suit of Banerjee has at least on this occasion freed her from the bonds of formality. She is now free to express the hope that Ashok might visit her after their return to Calcutta, while he will decide whether or not he will accept her invitation. It is, after all, a question of personal freedom. It may well be that she will not marry Ashok; indeed, it may well be that she will not even see him again. But the decision will be hers.

Towards the end of the afternoon Indranath has been rebuffed, Banerjee has spared Manisha by graciously retiring from his

quest, and Anima and Shankar have set their minds on reconciliation. Even the hungry boy of the hills is at last gratified by the hitherto self-absorbed Banerjee who gives him the chocolate intended as the winnings of a bet he had made with Manisha that the mountain would not become visible. But then the fog does indeed clear and Kanchanjungha is revealed in all its glory, just as the clouds of confusion that emanate from indifference and insensitivity in the petty lives of ordinary people might now have been minimised, if not obviated. The final shots are laced with a lovely touch of irony: once the fog has passed all that is left is a telling juxtaposition of the meek and the mighty, the beggar boy satisfied with his chocolate, and Indranath helplessly crying out for those who have failed to meet him.

If we want to know how, in fact, the clouds have been lifted, Ray would have us defer to the setting of his film. Twice Darjeeling is given as the reason for a change of mind. When Banerjee informs Manisha that he has decided against getting married, he suggests, "Maybe these romantic surroundings make you think that love is the most important thing in the world." Ashok is more explicit. Earlier he tells Manisha of the outcome of his recent interview with her father:

> ASHOK: He almost offered me a job. I refused.
> MANISHA: You must do as you wish.
> ASHOK (emphatically): Exactly!

Then, seeking an explanation for his audaciousness with Indranath, he says:

> In Calcutta I might have accepted it. But here, I've never seen such scenery. The majestic Himalayas, these silent pine-trees. This sudden sunlight, sudden clouds, sudden mist. It's so unreal, like a dream world. My head was in a whirl. Everything changed inside, as if I was a somebody—a hero! A giant! I was full of courage. I was reckless, undaunted. A place like this fills one with strength, doesn't it?

These lines are enhanced by background music evocative of something ethereal, mystical even, which is clearly intended to enhance the notion of the liberating power of nature in this particular part of the world that Ray has so carefully represented to us in its various moods. It hardly goes without saying that, given its setting, the film is visually beautiful. However, Ray does not exploit this visual beauty nor make a feature of it; rather, he uses it carefully, making the natural moods affected by sunshine, shadow, mist and cloud suit the moods of his gently and subtly developing ideas. Darjeeling is, as it were, organically melded with his film. The brief and simple reference to Calcutta (Banerjee also offers a similar one) immediately prompts notions of the busy and bustling workaday world with its established routines and systems of values; the contrast is exceptionally stark.

Kanchanjungha is the first of Ray's films to take up contemporary social criticism. In particular, he embarks here on a modernist reassessment of the roles and rights of women in a free and independent society. Shankar, whose own wife is something less than a paragon of faithfulness, is seen to be the champion of women's rights quite early in the film. This is preluded by an easy, genuine display of affection to his little girl whom he obviously loves very dearly. His particular concern is, of course, the focal concern of the film, his young sister-in-law, Manisha. He is perceptive enough to see Banerjee as an 'asset' for Indranath rather than the right man for Manisha whom he describes as being "treated like a puppet".

> ANIMA: She has her own will.
> SHANKAR: Does anyone have that in this family? I thought only the master's will counted.

There is something appealing about Shankar's apparent cynicism, perhaps because it serves to underline what we might already suspect to be the case.

Banerjee, of course, is a pleasant enough fellow, but what Ray would seem to be arguing through Shankar is that what others consider to be pleasant enough is not the point; the only concern is what Manisha thinks. Somewhat hastily Anima suggests that Manisha might, in fact, knock back Banerjee's proposal, if indeed he makes one, but she quickly reconsiders this; in stark reference to Shankar's worry that Manisha will not be happy married to Banerjee, she points out that "she has been taught that personal happiness doesn't count." Of course, it ought to count, as much for women as it does for men. It never counted for Labanya, but while she might stoically accept the relative joylessness of her life, she is determined that her younger daughter should not have to "accept a life of endless submission". Shankar would seem to be her strongest support. He offers Manisha the simple advice: "Don't marry unless you're in love." Towards the end of the film Banerjee raises the idea of the distinction in marriage between love and security. There is no doubt that he can offer her security, just as Indranath has endowed Labanya's life with the same comfort. But Labanya's life also illustrates the fact that for a woman, marital security also implies dependence; Shankar's emphasis on love would seek to obviate such submission. It is also significant that while the foundering marriage of Anima and Shankar might seem to underline Labanya's concern for Manisha, their resolve to reconcile their differences at the end of the film complements Manisha's release from Banerjee.

On the issue of a woman's right to independence, no one could be more remote from Shankar than his father-in-law. Indranath genuinely believes he is doing the best thing by his daughter in arranging a marriage to a man on a salary of twelve thousand a month, and cannot understand why Labanya should be at all sceptical about his ambition for Manisha. Labanya appeals to the fact that Manisha has not yet completed her education; Indranath casts this aside, declaring, "She'll graduate into a married woman," and offers the assertion that an educated

woman is merely a threat to the employment prospects of a man. Labanya borders on what Indranath would regard as heresy in saying, "She has a mind of her own. Just because *we* want—" but Indranath cuts her off, warning her against mistaken thinking. Labanya quite reasonably argues that the girl is only nineteen and is therefore too young to know what she is going into; Indranath counters this by asserting with characteristic vanity that his sixty years of experience is therefore essential to getting her started on the right path in life. As though to play his trump card, he defers to the decision his father once made for him, and asks Labanya—utterly unaware of the irony in his question—if he had done the wrong thing. Of course, marital tact dictates that she must, yet again, submit to him, even to the point of manufacturing a smile on his demand.

Kanchanjungha does not accede to the sublimity of the films of the Apu trilogy, *Devi* or *Charulata*, but then there are very few films that do. What is particularly important about it is its originality in making something artistically interesting out of ordinariness. The characters of *Kanchanjungha* are really quite inconsequential and their lives, in the greater scheme of things, would seem to be of little value, yet out of this petty mundanity an exceptionally fine film has been created. Perhaps the reason for Ray's mastery in this apparent paradox lies more in what he alludes to rather than in what he tells. The references to such things as the new India and a critical reassessment of the colonial past, respect for the individual's right to self-determination, the resolution of the tension between self-interest and responsibility, and the value of seeing humanity through a much wider lens than through the narrow prism fashioned by notions of social class all create a richer context in which the ostensibly petty content of the film might find root and continue to prosper long after the film has been seen.

There are, however, certain uncomfortable moments in *Kanchanjungha* that tend to rub away some of its gloss. While

the role of Anil may not be merely gratuitous, he is nevertheless an unnecessary character and, given his fatuousness, an element which the film would have been better without. At best his sequences offer a diversion, yet that is, in effect, more of a distraction from the otherwise well moulded integrity of the film. Nor does Jogadish's declamation on behalf of the birds of the world against nuclear testing seem integral to the film's philosophy, but even if its relevance were obvious, it somehow descends into a moment of melodramatic absurdity. Similarly over-played—by an actor whose restraint is a hallmark of the quality of his performance—is Ashok's self-congratulatory laughter after having stood up to Indranath. Indranath himself, played by the legendary Chhabi Biswas, is gratingly unconvincing in his occasional uses of English, especially in the ponderously delivered opening lines of the film, and his cultivated arrogance is occasionally marred by what comes across as common bullying. His studied pose, leaning on one knee with his foot resting on the seat as he looks out across the valley while talking to Labanya, is simply that—a studied pose carrying no artistic conviction. Perhaps the greatest source of discomfort is the amount of tobacco that is burned during the course of the film[5]. While the cigar-smoking of Indranath might be defended as being part of his Anglo affectation, the chain smoking of both Banerjee and Shankar are excessive to the point of distraction, the action and dialogue even being held up momentarily at one point while Banerjee all too self-consciously lights up yet another cigarette. At times one wonders if the mountain might have been revealed a little earlier had it not been for the clouds of smoke created by these tobacco addicts. But for all their polluting endeavours, they cannot spoil what is not only an intelligent and socially significant piece of

[5] Of course, in 1962 smoking was not yet acknowledged conclusively as the danger it is now known to be, so Ray can hardly be accused of social irresponsibility.

cinema, but also a thoroughly delightful and visually beautiful film.

Much of Ray's interest in *Kanchanjungha* finds form also in *Mahanagar* ("The Great City", 1963). Outwardly we may discern many differences between the two films, the more obvious ones being the colour of *Kanchanjungha* and the black and white of *Mahanagar*, the original story of the one and the adapted story of the other, the poles-apart settings of Darjeeling and Calcutta, and the wealthy upper-class characters of one film and the struggling lower middle-class family of the other. However, underneath these outward differences we find some remarkable similarities. In both films we encounter the figure of the obdurate and conservative *pater familias*; in both films we are obliged to acknowledge tension between the old and the new or tradition and progress; in both films Ray takes the opportunity to question traditionally held social values and *bhadralok* notions of respectability;[6] and both films allow him to raise the issue of women's independence in Indian society.

Prior to *Mahanagar* an interest in women in a familial, social or idealised sense had been an important aspect of Ray's cinema. In both *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajita* Sarbajaya embodies the eternal and universal struggling housewife, while in *Apur Sansar* Aparna may be seen, quite realistically, as a feminine ideal. On the other hand, in *Devi* Ray delivers a frightening warning against the dangers of an unrealistic idealisation of women founded on the ignorance and superstition emanating from religious fundamentalism and its extravagant ramifications. In the *Postmaster* and *Samapti* chapters of *Tin Kanya* he explores notions of conflict between natural innocence and social expectation in young women, while in the *Monihara* segment there is an exposition of female vanity and venality. In *Mahanagar* there are allusions to the Sarbajaya type in the struggle of the

[6] Literally 'gentle folk,' *bhadralok* is the term given to the Bengali educated classes.

woman to keep the household functioning on a less than meagre budget. There are faint echoes of *Devi* in the kind of idealisation of women that, under different circumstances, rationalises the prevention of a wife from going out to work, although these echoes are indeed faint and are hardly strong enough to warrant more than passing notice. Of much greater significance is a continuing interest in the ideas presented in *Kanchanjungha* regarding a woman's right to make her own choices rather than have them made for her by her husband, father or father-in-law.

The context of *Mahanagar* is noteworthy. Ray chooses to set the film a few years earlier than when it was made, in the mid-1950s when Indian banks were experiencing troubles, an experience that impinges acutely on the second half of the film. At this time free India was only seven or eight years old and its economy was still struggling with the enormous and complex ramifications of the dramatic jump from colonialism to independence. Many parts of India, and most especially Calcutta, were still trying to cope with the horrendous social upheavals brought about by the Partition, the most obvious lingering consequence of which was the sudden inflation of the population with the massive influx of refugees from what had become East Pakistan and the inadequacy of the economy to provide jobs for all who sought them. We might note, incidentally, that the Mazumdars—the family on whom the film focuses—are from Pabna in the former East Bengal, now East Pakistan, as indeed is Arati's later boss, Himangsu Mukherjee.

As in *Kanchanjungha* the story of *Mahanagar* is slight, for again Ray's interest lies more in the exploration of values than in the playing out of actions and events as, for example, in the Apu trilogy or *Abhijan*. The film focuses on a poor, lower middle class family, the Mazumdars—Subrata, his wife Arati and their little boy Pintu—who live in a very small flat in Kalighat, an inner suburban area of Calcutta, once grand but certainly no longer so. Sharing the flat are Subrata's parents, Priyagopal a

Sarojini, and his sister, Bani. The drama that threatens the peace of the family arises out of Arati's decision to take on a job. Subrata is uncomfortable about his wife going out to work but is more uncomfortable trying to survive on his meagre bank clerk's salary inadequately supplemented by the trifle he earns from giving private tuition. The economic reality is stark and seemingly inescapable, and Subrata allows Arati to take up her job. His father, on the other hand, readily acknowledges the harsh economic reality, but cannot be convinced that it is severe enough to warrant his daughter-in-law's joining the workforce. The tension in the family is such that father and son are no longer on speaking terms and even the small boy gets ill, by implication because his mother is not at home to look after him in accordance with her proper role as a wife and mother. Eventually Arati is prevailed upon to give up her job, but is kept from doing so at the last minute when Subrata's bank collapses and he finds himself out of work. Soon after that she does submit her resignation, not to gratify her husband or her father-in-law, but in protest at what she perceives to be an injustice against a colleague on the part of their employer.

The narrative is played out in two main spheres, the domestic and the commercial. The former is simply the interior of the tiny flat in which the Mazumdars live, and the lane outside; the latter is the office suite of 'Autonit', the company presided over by Himangsu Mukherjee, and one or two locations in a fashionable suburb where Arati tries to sell knitting machines door to door. Himangsu's desk is placed before a huge window affording a clear view of the busy street below, a reminder to the audience—for Himangsu has his back to it most of the time—of the actuality of the vast and busy metropolis and its all-encompassing umbrella of anonymity. There are also a few shots inside and outside Subrata's bank. Following a subsidiary narrative we are taken to three locations where Priyagopal visits some of his more successful former students in his quest for material

assistance. There is also a short scene in the flat of Edith Simmons, Arati's Anglo-Indian workmate, and one in a tea shop.

The rather long opening section in the Mazumdars' flat is extraordinarily eloquent in its depiction of the conditions under which lower middle-class families are obliged to live. The opening titles sequence focuses on Subrata as just one of innumerable commuters coming home from work, thus creating a visual suggestion of his typicality; hence, the situation of the Mazumdars is not extraordinary but one common to an entire class of Calcuttans. The superbly designed set recreates the typical home of tens of thousands, right down to the conventional signs of cultural identity in the pictures of Tagore, the novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee and the religious reformer Ramakrishna on the walls. (Conventionally commonplace as such icons may be, they offer a notable contrast to the poster on Himangsu's office wall proclaiming, in English, "You'd be a nitwit not to knit with an Autonit".) The cramped space in which privacy is made impossible is a clear physical indication of the dominance of group or family dynamics over those of the individual. The composition of almost every shot is designed to stress this point, as characters seemingly without choice find themselves in front of the camera, such as Bani brushing her hair in the background as Subrata and Arati talk to one another; there are similarly effective transitions, as, when Arati leaves her father-in-law's room, the cut to the other side of the door takes in, in the foreground, her mother-in-law squatting beside the stove, frying fish. The setting necessitates a lot of close and medium-close shots which, in turn, establish an intimacy between the screen and the viewer. In the scene in which Arati is seen lying awake and thinking aloud about the prospect of her taking a job, the close shots bring the viewer into an extraordinary familiarity with her and her dilemma. (By contrast, the composition of the shots outside the home seems to luxuriate in spaciousness.) There is also an aural aspect to this confinement,

underlined by Subrata's joking observation that, living where they do, they do not need to buy a radio as they can always listen to the neighbours'.

The design here is extraordinarily important: not only does it present in every detail the Mazumdars' flat as representative of lower middle-class Calcutta, but it also provides a constant visual reinforcement of the problems and values that inflect the dialogue throughout the opening sequence. There is the routine bemoaning of the bhadralok plight, as in Priyagopal's self-pitying pronouncement that he had been born to be a teacher (though one might fairly suspect he quite deliberately made the choice of a genteel profession within his own limitations) and was thereby destined to the life of privation that goes with it. He sees an injustice in the fact that his former students are all wealthy and successful whereas he is no better off than when he started—and yet they owe their success to him. It is a narrow, self-centred argument, but enough to justify to himself his going cap in hand to several of them later in the film. Subrata observes with similar resignation that the proprietor of a *bidi*[7] manufactory is far better off than a graduate employee of a bank, such as himself. Then, when Subrata learns that Arati had to borrow tea from a neighbour to allow him to enjoy his after-work cup, he chides her for compromising the family's status in borrowing, at the same time casting an aspersion on the miserliness of the neighbour for the inferior quality of the tea. Although the family are straining to make ends meet, they still maintain a servant to do their house-cleaning for them, a task presumably beneath bhadralok dignity. It is a real struggle to pay the woman's wage, as it is to maintain Bani in her studies, to pay the fees for Pintu's school, to provide the mother with a simple luxury like *jarda*[8] and the father with the indispensable necessity of new glasses. They deny themselves much, while Subrata gives private

[7] A small and very cheap cigarette made from inferior tobacco.

[8] A tobacco ingredient chewed with betel leaves.

tuition as a means of supplementing his income. (The fact that he has to go chasing fees owed to him—just as their servant is owed her wages by them—suggests that others are in a similar plight to his, not just in surviving but in the struggle to maintain 'family status'.)

Arati's desire to join the work-force does not arise as much out of the necessary self-denial of their condition as it does from seeing the stringent self-sacrifice shown by her husband. (The first thing we see Subrata do, when coming home on the tram, is to yawn; the physical strain he undergoes will come to tell on him.) Her admiration and her pity for him move her to determine herself to stand beside him somehow as a sharer of the burden. At first her decision to get a job meets with playful opposition from Subrata, whose strongest argument is the English platitude proclaiming a woman's place to be in the home. Far more compelling, however, is the financial reality they must face day by day, and Subrata's formal resistance to his wife's working soon softens. It is, in fact, he who finds her job notice in the paper, and it is he who composes and has typed her letter of application. Moreover, he readily expresses a willingness to seek an advance to provide Arati with new clothes for her job. The same positive approach cannot be attributed to his parents, and it is their obdurate resistance to Arati's venture into modernity that highlights the complexity of human relationships which gives the film its depth.

It is a chance remark about a friend and his wife—"the two of them are working"—that sets Arati thinking about taking up a job herself, although there is a brief allusion to the issue of women working when Subrata playfully chaffs Bani, asking her why she bothers to study when she will end up in a kitchen like her sister-in-law.[9] In fact, Subrata's attitude to his working wife

[9] On this point we might note a touch of irony coming from *Nayak*, made only two years later, in which Mr Bose says to Mrs Sarkar, "Bengali

(contd.)

gradually changes from feigned opposition to playful indulgence to serious support, a stance that might well have been maintained had it not been for 'the cold war', as he puts it, launched by his parents. His father is a natural conservative who "cannot believe how much Calcutta has changed". (His own inability to adapt to change is amusingly displayed in the waiting room of his former student, the ophthalmologist. Priyagopal opens a magazine at random and his eyes—even without the aid of glasses—are assailed by some pictures of females modelling swimwear. A split second glance is all it takes for him to shut the magazine and put it back on the table.) Priyagopal is adamant in his refusal to accept his daughter-in-law as a working woman, even to the point of categorically rejecting the offer of money from her wages on the occasion of his birthday. Further, his pride descends to a mean pettiness when he sourly refuses to look at his grandson's new toys bought with his daughter-in-law's earnings. Sarojini maintains a stoic silence for a time, but for more than a month and a half Priyagopal refuses to speak to his son. Bani offers a refreshing contrast of ardent encouragement, but it is not enough to thaw the iciness of her parents, especially her father. Thus it is remarkable that under such personal strain Arati can continue to do a day's work outside the home and also keep the household together. The strain tells on Subrata, however. The gradual change in his temperament from easy-going contentment at the start of the film to the moods of a man under stress is made evident in both his demeanour and his appearance. His eventual instruction to Arati to submit her resignation is due purely to the deterioration of relations in the home. When his bank collapses and he loses his job, so obliging Arati to withhold her resignation, his

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(contd.)

girls go hunting and mountaineering these days. They even fly aeroplanes. Some of them are barristers. So why can't they work in an ordinary advertising firm?"

sombreness is further darkened by an incipient bitterness at his own helplessness and his inability to cope with the anomaly in the fact that what was breaking the family up is now the very thing that must materially hold it together.

Arati is not just a dutiful wife, mother, sister-in-law and daughter-in-law, she is also genuinely devoted to her husband and his family. Not only does she feel pain for Subrata in his self-denying endeavours to support the household, but she shows loving care for the health of her father-in-law and feels profound pity for the old man, desperate to keep himself occupied by straining his eyes over crossword puzzles at night. She is also worried by the back pain suffered by her mother-in-law and expresses her willingness to spare her the trouble of the cooking by doing it herself. Her affection for Bani is heartfelt and spontaneous; she readily confides in her once she has decided to seek a job, and when she gets her first pay she buys the girl her first sari. Her love for her little boy is obvious on numerous occasions, and there is one touching moment in the sumptuous and spacious lounge room of a prospective client when the camera lingers on her glance at the small boy of that family—about the same age as Pintu—as she perhaps thinks of her own son and the material comfort of this other little boy.

A man's pride in keeping his wife without her having to go out to work is dependent more on his earning capacity than on the worthiness of any social principle. It is all very well for Priyagopal to stand unrelenting on such principle—or, as seems more likely, personal pride—but it must be remembered that he and his wife and daughter are dependent members of Subrata's household. Any respect for him as a man of principle is severely diminished by his readiness to take his eloquent though sentimental rhetoric to his former students in order to scrounge whatever he can from them, rationalising that as they are what they are because of him, he is therefore entitled to a *gurudakshina* from them. The ancient Indian concept of a guru and the dues

made to him on completion of his work can be only remotely related to the modern concept of a salaried schoolteacher, but the bhadralok, whose speech is often clothed in hyperbole, easily conflates the poetic with the actual. What makes Priyagopal's brand of begging particularly disagreeable is his readiness to traduce his own son as a man who is careless of his father's well-being; to his credit, he readily confesses to this sin after the shock of his fall toward the end of the film.

The complexity of relationships inflected by tradition underlies much of what happens outside of the house, especially in Arati's world of 'Autonit'. Before she gets her job, Arati, apprehensive of her in-laws' reaction to her going to the interview, asks Subrata what she should tell them. He tells her to say that she is going to visit her parents. He dispels her initial aversion to the mendaciousness of this by telling her that an employer, as provider and protector, is the same as a father. It is a neat little introduction, albeit unwitting and incidental, to the world of Himangsu Mukherjee. His business is notably patriarchal and he is the pinnacle of authority, looking after his staff as long as they are hard-working, efficient and unquestioningly loyal to him. In many ways this patriarchal atmosphere replicates that of the home, and Arati, the ever dutiful and devoted wife and daughter-in-law, readily fits into it. It is for this reason and nothing untoward that Himangsu is seen to extend a degree of favouritism to her; of the five salesgirls on his staff Arati is the one whose staunch support might surely be counted on, just as it is by Subrata and Priyagopal. Himangsu resents Edith's representing the women—something he would prefer Arati to do—and confesses to Arati that he was rude to Edith "because I did not like her approach". Her approach probably grated against his sense of patriarchy, and when it is Arati's turn to take a stand on principle, Himangsu is genuinely astonished at what he sees as her withdrawal of her loyalty to him—something which is, in effect, a deliberate blow to that very patriarchy.

As much of Priyagopal's philosophy is determined by tradition, Himangsu's is coloured by popular prejudice. Edith Simmons, in support of whom Arati resigns, is an Anglo-Indian, and Himangsu, a high-caste Hindu, holds her community in some degree of contempt. (Indeed, at the risk of quibbling over petty detail, one might wonder why he employed her in the first place.) He sees her as one all too ready to rock the boat, not fitting naturally into the patriarchal ambience of Autonit as Arati, for example, does. Indeed, her first words to Arati are a mild expression of contempt for the "silly questions" asked in the job interview, and there is a suggestion of a chip on the shoulder when she complains that Arati's wages are clean, new notes, whereas hers are old and crumpled (she says she is only joking, but accepts Arati's offer of a swap nevertheless). Her alacrity in representing the interests of the salesgirls as a kind of union delegate and her expressions to them of her antipathy toward their boss do provide some justification for Himangsu's judgement of her. As for the genuineness of her illness, Himangsu's suspicion of her—at least, according to Arati—is quite unfair, although Ray makes it obvious to the viewer that Edith is hardly so sick that she cannot go to work. Nevertheless, Himangsu does succumb to communal prejudice, so compromising his worthiness as a man, just as Priyagopal's respectability is compromised by his bigotry and his unbecoming cadging.

It is more than a trifle significant that there may be an element of sexual insecurity in allowing a wife to go out to work. Subrata would seem to be aware of this in telling Arati that beautiful women such as she should not be allowed to work as they would provide a distraction to their colleagues. In the context of this particular stage of the film it is easy to take the remark as Subrata's jocular way of complimenting his lovely wife. As the film progresses, however, one comes to fancy a genuine uneasiness lurking behind Subrata's facetiousness. Once

the application procedure is underway, he jokingly tells her not to chew betel leaves before the interview, hinting that this would give her lips an alluring tinge of red which might send out a quite inappropriate signal. When Arati confides in Bani that she is applying for a job, the girl tells her to try to become a film star so that she can make her face up, especially with lipstick (which she mimes rather grotesquely). Later, when she gets her first pay packet, she goes into the bathroom to look at the money in private. Edith joins her and gives her a lipstick. At this stage Arati has undergone, albeit unwittingly, something of a transformation in having held a handful of notes earned by herself to her breast and then looked in the mirror at a newly self-sufficient woman. Now she allows Edith to apply a little of the lipstick for her, admires her new appearance, yet hurriedly wipes it off on a tissue that can be discarded, not on her handkerchief—she is careful not to create evidence of any perceptible impropriety. Although she would seem to be growing in self-empowerment, she is still deferring to patriarchal values. She discards the tissue, but keeps the lipstick in her handbag. A later scene shows her arriving home from work, stopping in the lane beside the house and checking in her compact mirror that there is no trace of the decadent paint. She is later seen hesitating to apply the lipstick while waiting for the lift, but then decides to apply it in the bathroom. The simple, trivial lipstick has become a token of self-determination, her passport from the male-dominated domestic realm to a public domain where she is respected and admired for herself and her work. When Subrata, having inadvertently discovered the lipstick in her bag, sarcastically draws her attention to it, she defiantly throws it through the window, incidentally exposing Subrata's uncharacteristic pettiness, while at the same time delivering an assertive warning that she should not be misunderstood. Soon after she arrives at work, Himangsu alludes to exciting new prospects for her, not knowing that she has in her handbag a

letter of resignation, composed by her husband. The lipstick, of course, is not a reason for the letter—it would have been written had the lipstick not even existed – but it is a simple catalyst in exposing the discomfort experienced by many conservative men in allowing their wives public independence.

Mahanagar is as much about Subrata as it is about Arati; more so, it is very much a story of a marriage. At the outset we see a happy partnership shining through straitened circumstances, and it will appear to be threatened only when the two partners act independently of one another. The job is not a threat to their harmony as long as they both share a positive attitude towards it. However, once Subrata's jocularity is sobered by the petulance of his narrow, conservative father, we see his light-heartedness becoming clouded by doubt. There seems to be something on his mind when he questions Arati about her boss, his mood clearly contrasting with her innocently fresh enthusiasm. He suggests that she has changed as a result of her work, failing to see that the real change is occurring in himself. There is a cut to Subrata calling a friend in the hope of obtaining his help in finding a part-time job. The juxtaposition of these two ideas would suggest that Subrata's self-esteem is under threat from his wife's new found self-determination. Then, in the emotional context of Pintu's attack of fever, he tells Arati she must give up her job, reassuring her with his expectation of a part-time job to compensate for her lack of earnings. The reason he gives is a need for domestic peace—something more important than money, as he puts it—as his father has not spoken to him for more than a month and a half. Clearly, the strain Subrata is suffering has been produced largely by Priyagopal. This strain is soon exacerbated, while the prospect of familial peace is obscured by the trauma of losing his job along with the evaporation of the hope of part-time work. He becomes more morose (his mood visually enhanced by his continuing need of a shave) and bitter: his response to Arati's raise in salary is to mutter in churlish self-

pity, "The wife prospers while the husband despairs". This is a sad contrast to his heartening response to her earlier musing about the possibility of one day affording a fan, observing playfully that with the money she earns they could get air-conditioning.

It must be remembered that Arati's decision to take up a job in the first place was purely out of devotion to Subrata. There is never any question of her seeking a job to acquire freedom from domestic drudgery or empowerment over her subdued condition, and with a salary of a hundred rupees a month she can still less be accused of fortune-seeking. Her simple and profoundly felt wish is to stand beside her husband as his staunch support in maintaining the household. As though in acknowledgement of this devotion, Subrata initially gives her strong encouragement in her job application, in her preparing herself for the interview, and on her first day at work. On the way to the office he notices her hand is shaking, and he expresses his surprise that at her age she should be nervous. She tells him she was nervous only once before, on the day of their marriage; now she is nervous again, for the sake of their marriage. On her first morning at work Subrata rings Arati at her office to check that she is all right. This obvious mutual devotion makes the situation all the more sad when Subrata's antipathy starts to emerge, yet it is that same devotion, fleetingly doubted by Subrata, that dissolves his negativity. The scene is a teashop, where Subrata has gone to be alone with the 'Wanted' columns of the newspaper. By chance Arati appears outside and encounters, also by chance, the evidently successful husband of an old friend. Hiding behind his newspaper Subrata listens as Arati, completely unaware of his presence, regales her companion with a highly exaggerated story about her husband's accomplishments and how understanding he has been to grant her wish to work for a little while. Cinematically it is a simple and perhaps hackneyed device, but it serves the purpose of shaming Subrata into reminding himself of the utter selflessness of his wife.

There is no doubt, of course, that the real villain—a leopard utterly unable to change his spots—is Subrata's father and the outdated values in which he is saturated. Intellectually he appears rather dull, always falling back on tired tenets of traditional faith. When his wife gives voice to her embarrassment at the burden they have foisted upon Subrata, and how he and Arati would be so much better off without them there, Priyagopal does not have the perception or the unselfishness to see the truth in her words. He merely asserts the traditional platitude that they have a right in their old age to be supported by their son. But to claim his son's support is one thing, to behave with such mulish obstinacy on a matter of questionable principle that the joy starts to go out of the son's marriage is quite another. It is perfectly plain that if Priyagopal were not in the house, the story of Subrata and Arati would be a very different one. Yet despite the poisonous threat her father-in-law poses towards her marriage, Arati's affectionate devotion to him never wanes, even after his confession of calumniating his own son in order to scrounge more effectively from his former students.

The film's title, *Mahanagar* or 'the great city', is of some interest. In fact, the big city as such appears infrequently in the film. Aspects of it are prominent at various times, but only rarely are we aware of the vast urban collective that so clearly defines the three films of the Calcutta triptych,[10] for example. The opening titles sequence is designed to suggest 'city' rather than something more particular as it follows a tram through the streets of Calcutta. For the most part, however, the camera concentrates on the connection between the tram pole and the overhead wire; it is nothing like the brief city tour by bus that lends such interest to the opening titles sequence of *Pratidwandi*. The public parts of the film, such as the street outside the Mazumdars' house or the riot outside Subrata's bank, are not at all pertinent to Calcutta as such. There are a couple of shots of

[10] *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*. See Chapter 5.

Arati crossing the road which, like the shots of Subrata in the tram coming home from work, serve to dilute her particular identity in the overall mass of the city. This amorphous nature of the city is well conveyed by the backdrop to Himangsu's office, a constant reminder of the anonymous, all-embracing generality that denies particularity to individuals, challenges the worth of tradition and gives root to an impersonal economy that distributes and withholds wealth seemingly willy-nilly. Like an awesome god it is indeterminable and unknowable. In the triptych films the character of a particular city comes across just like a human character; in *Mahanagar*, the city remains an abstraction. This idea of the city also allows for remarkable variety, which Ray hints at in several passing instances. In the course of her work Arati takes us into a domestic world infinitely remote from the cramped flats of Kalighat, with opulent space and comfort and where children listen to Western pop music. On one occasion, when Arati is going up the stairs to her office, she is passed by three Sikhs on the way down, an inconsequential occurrence that serves little other than to remind us of the multifariousness of Indian society. The amazing change in the big city that Priyagopal finds so hard to believe must emanate in some ways from the continuing variety of the city, something that makes the world of Subrata and Arati considerably less confined than the one in which he had grown up.

The film ends in paradox and inconclusiveness. When Arati leaves Himangsu's office having made her stand against injustice, she meets Subrata who has come at Himangsu's invitation to see what he might do about getting him a new job. Arati's moral triumph is tempered by the consequent scuttling of Subrata's renewed hope. While he cannot be happy at the turn in their fortunes, he is genuine in expressing his pride in her moral courage. It is ironic that this pride must be tempered by an acceptance of such a setback. Although their future is now gravely uncertain, hope comes from Subrata's agreement with Arati's

words, "It is such a big city, with so many different jobs. There must be something for us." There is also something positive in her declaration that she has found a new confidence in life, a confidence that to some extent must stem from her confrontation with patriarchal tradition at home and at work, while Subrata is bolstered by a greatly enhanced admiration of his wife. It is in this mood that the two of them are shown to stride purposively together and merge into the view from Himangsu's office. It is an interesting ending encompassing a submission, a victory and a reaffirmation of the strength of marriage, even though we might well suspect that they are headed back to the treadmill of penny-pinching.

Mahanagar is exceptionally well sign-posted and is a superb achievement in continuity. There are many indications, albeit subtle and maybe unrecognisable as such at first, of what is to come. Fundamental to the smoothness of the film is the balance implied by the family structure, particularly in the character of Bani. The trauma of Subrata's loss of his job is hinted at, first in a brief scene in which a dodgy cheque is being examined and then when a prospective customer asks Subrata about the security of the bank, given that he has heard disquieting rumours. We cannot share Subrata's confidence in his getting a part-time job; Ray has given us nothing to believe that an unforeseen turn for the good will suddenly redirect the course of the narrative. The obviously casual attitude of Subrata's friend also militates against hope, and his "I can't assure you of anything" is as good as a prediction. Arati's transition from housewife to working woman is handled extraordinarily well. It is interesting to note that the mechanics of her applying, presenting for an interview and then being appointed are gone through with amazing brevity and only by means of reports of a note indicating a time for an interview and then a letter of appointment. On the other hand, the time taken in getting Arati out of the house and off to the office is extremely unhurried. As she has breakfast with Subrata,

possibly, as Bani points out, for the first time, the mood is influenced by Arati's nervousness, Bani's liveliness and Sarojini's sombre silence at the stove. After dealing tenderly with a display of temper from Pintu, Arati walks slowly from the house with Subrata, only to be called back for a moment by the little boy keen to know what his mother will buy for him. This apparent imbalance is a matter of emphasis, suggesting that what is important is not so much Arati's getting a job as her having to manage both job and home, and the claim that home has on her is very strong. Going to work on that morning is not such a big step for Arati; leaving the house is.

Technically *Mahanagar* is an admirable film. Much of its quality rests on the intimacy created by its superb camera work, especially in the Mazumdars' flat; here, too, the continuity of the editing is so smooth that the viewer has the feeling of actually moving about the small flat as one space seems to merge into another. Atmosphere too is very effectively created by the cinematography and the art direction, and there is a clear contrast between the confinement of the flat, which is almost stifling at times, and the spaciousness of the world outside, although this can be slightly beguiling in the case of Himangsu's office where, despite the broad backdrop of the window, there is another sense of confinement with the door always shut and the broad desk establishing a buffer zone between the patriarch and his minions.

Whatever social controversy *Mahanagar* might have provoked in the sixties has become flat forty years later. The idea of a woman pursuing a career is no longer an issue, with women to be found in virtually every form of employment and, in some states, outnumbering men in higher education enrolments. This is not to say, however, that the film has lost any of its relevance. It is at least questionable that the film ever was intended to inspire polemic on a woman's right to work. Rather, the strength of the film is to be found in the complexity of the human

relationships that give shape to its narrative; only by extension is it a 'social interest' film in so far as the characters who form these relationships are to various extents moulded by traditions and conventions, and these public values are far more complicated than any single issue such as a woman's right to work. Ray's sense of economy here is fundamental to the strength of his film in that the content is not intellectually overloaded. It is sufficient to focus on the inexorability of Priyagopal while at the same time keeping his role in the narrative as quite a subsidiary one. Thus, the various struggles of two ordinary people in an urban whirl of economic and moral uncertainty give the film its undoubted value; an analysis of the uncertainty, not only warranted but also important, is nevertheless secondary. *Mahanagar* more than forty years on is one of India's finer films for many reasons, by no means the least of which is its human warmth and sympathy.

After the excellent *Mahanagar* Ray made the masterpiece, *Charulata*. The remaining films of the sixties are all notably lesser works. *Kapurush o Mahapurush*, *Chidiakhana* and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* are discussed in other chapters. There remain only *Nayak* and *Aranyer Din Ratri* to be discussed here. It cannot be said that either of these films is a match for the fine works of the early years of the decade (from which *Abhijan* would have to be excluded). All of these lesser works point to the fact that even a masterly filmmaker can make films which less illustrious filmmakers might also be able to make.

With *Nayak* Ray turned his attention to cinema, or rather, the public perception of cinema, and its 'heroes'. It was fitting, then, that Ray should cast as his 'hero' a living legend of the Bengali popular screen, the superstar Uttam Kumar, who plays the role of the highly successful and immensely popular actor, Arindam Mukherjee. Largely by means of a protracted interview with a journalist, Aditi Sen Gupta (played by another screen celebrity, Sharmila Tagore), Ray questions the worth of a typical

star and his profession. However, this external scrutiny soon becomes internalised as the introspection of the subject becomes highlighted.

Like *Kanchanjungha*, *Nayak* is an original story, has a negligible plot and is structured through a series of loosely connected episodes, though it lacks the formal integrity of its predecessor as well as the import of its substance. Most of the film is played out on a train taking Arindam from Calcutta to Delhi to receive a prestigious award, and his conversations with Aditi Sen Gupta take up most of his travel time. These conversations give rise to a number of significant reminiscences which are given form as conventional flashbacks. Arindam sleeps three times during the journey and his dreams provide us with some insight into the nature of his introspection. There are also discrete, though relevant, interactions among the other passengers and between some of them and Arindam.

There is a brief introductory section as Arindam prepares to leave home for his journey to the capital. The opening shots do not reveal his face but focus on the actions of a man attending to his appearance. (It may be that our attention is being drawn to the film personality's concern for image, but too much can be made of this—after all, most men shave, brush their hair and dress as neatly as they can before going out.) Two significant things emerge from this sequence. One is the fact that Arindam is an eminently successful man. We are impressed by the tasteful opulence of his flat, the snatches of dialogue that suggest he has fingers in a number of profitable pies, and the amount of 'pocket money' he takes from his cupboard. The second is a newspaper report, which Arindam elucidates to a business caller while he is having his breakfast, referring to a recent incident in a club in which a drunken Arindam assaulted another man on account of—as he would have us believe—the honour of a lady. In comparison with the bland press report Arindam's slightly decorated version of the event has a noticeably 'filmi' flavour.

As soon as Arindam boards the train, he is confronted by a sample of the range of popular perceptions held of film actors. It is important that this should be looked at first as it is probably fundamental to all the subsequent issues Ray raises about the social and cultural worthiness of cinema. The attendant offers Arindam a choice of two berths, one in a coupe with an elderly Mr Chatterjee and the other in a compartment with the Bose family—husband and wife and invalid daughter. He elects to first of all meet Mr Chatterjee, who immediately expresses his contempt for the 'well known' immorality of film people. Having his suspicion confirmed that Arindam indulges in the demon drink, he makes it clear that for reasons of his own health he could not share a coupe with a drinker and dismisses Arindam with a brief homily on the value of discipline and self-control. The actor has no choice but to join the Bose family. The daughter, Bulbul, confined to her bunk with a fever, quietly adores the celebrity who has unexpectedly come into her world; her mother admires him as an accomplished actor and sincerely congratulates him on his award; the father, however, on the basis of the unfortunate report in the morning's newspaper, is curt towards him, his moralistic disapproval justified simply by the fact that 'scandal is scandal'. Arindam's first encounter with Aditi is at the urging of her travelling companions who are curious about the news item and suggest that Aditi do an interview with the actor for her magazine, *Adhunika* or 'Modern Woman'.

There is nothing wrong with curiosity, save that prompted by prurience, and Mrs Bose's attitude toward Arindam is positive and not, it would seem, mindless. The attitudes of Mr Bose and Mr Chatterjee are unreasonable yet commonly held. Old Chatterjee might be excused his categorical thinking with its daring generalisations on the grounds of his evident dottiness, yet there is a widely held view that the film world is a breeding ground of vice. Of course, there is no compelling evidence to believe that actors are more prone to vice than any other members

of the community—including, perhaps, the police—but they are blessed—or cursed—with much greater public exposure than their fellow citizens and so are subject to more frequent scrutiny. Moreover, there is a streak of hypocrisy, as we shall see, in Bose's claim to any moral high ground. We may laugh at the senile Chatterjee, prolific letter writer to *The Statesman*, and see through the self-important Bose, but Ray also is prompting a degree of questioning on the part of his audience.

At first Arindam is reticent regarding Aditi's wish to interview him, claiming that all that needs to be known about him is already public knowledge. 'All that needs to be known', of course, really means 'all that I want to be known.' Nevertheless, this raises the important point of an artiste's right to privacy as well as the question of where a line should be drawn between privacy and publicity. What journalists so often piously describe as 'the public's right to know' really means 'the company's desire to sell papers,' and this 'right' frequently impinges on the sentiments of people in the public gaze. While an actor may need and enjoy publicity, he also has a right to the protection of his personal life, so it is quite reasonable for Arindam to demur to Aditi's questioning. However, while maintaining his defences Arindam also feels the need to articulate a few things about himself and so cast from his cupboard a number of skeletons. It is this need for personal introspection on the part of Arindam that gives the film so much of its substance.

While the primary function of Aditi is to bring to the audience a fuller understanding of Arindam, there is also interest in her and in the way in which Arindam responds to her. When she introduces herself to him, she is careful to maintain a distance, claiming the autograph she requests is for her cousin. When asked about Bengali cinema, she complains that it lacks realism, citing the god-like nature ascribed to its leading men. She is obviously not going to fawn upon Arindam, and expresses a readiness even to pull him down a peg if necessary. She is not

interested in what is common knowledge but in the man behind the reputation. However, Arindam is anxious to remain, at least in the public perception, "a creature of light and shade" rather than "a man of flesh and blood". In other words his marketability has to be protected. Politely articulating her aversion to such a concept, Aditi returns to her seat, commenting to her companions on Arindam's preciousness: "He is like a rare, tender plant."

They meet again after Arindam has awoken from the first of his disturbing dreams. He asks Aditi what she knows about dreams and her answer—as much for the audience as for Arindam—is that they often reflect the fears and anxieties in one's subconscious. What Arindam appears to be is very much the product of fear and anxiety, and as he divulges some of this to Aditi the interview surreptitiously resumes.

During the course of their discussions Aditi shows a pronounced objectivity towards Arindam's introspection and the uncertain world with which he is still trying to come to terms. For most of the time Aditi appears to be in control, letting Arindam take the interview where he will, but keeping him in line with an occasional probing or disarming question. However, there is one exceptionally well acted segment where Arindam is completely in control of the situation and Aditi is acutely embarrassed. The train has come to a station where word of Arindam's advent has obviously preceded him and a large crowd of admirers, all of them young men, has gathered outside his window. Aditi is extremely uncomfortable at being the object of their attention, while Arindam is completely at home, ignoring them as though they were not even there. "Just act normal," he tells Aditi. But Aditi is a journalist; she can write, but she cannot act. Later, after having heard much of Arindam's troubling memories, she returns to her seat, this time quite preoccupied with something considerably deeper than a precious flower.

In the course of his dialogue with Aditi, Arindam, in his recollections of three men who had been influential in his life,

reveals three things in particular that have troubled his mind and which Ray, we may assume, feels should be aired publicly. The first of these is the alleged worthlessness of film as art (and as anything else, as some would have it). There is still a widely held belief that cinema is mere popular entertainment and as such is inferior to literature, music and the fine arts. In particular, there is the view held by many that theatre is superior to cinema. The second controversy that had given Arindam some bother is also an ongoing one and concerns styles of acting. Specifically it may be said that the school which holds that the best acting is non-acting is not greatly in evidence in Indian cinema and telefilm, even today, where acting is so often obvious, exaggerated, stylised and clichéd. The third problem concerns the degree to which an actor may be called on to use his public image in the 'service' of wider social interests.

The value of cinema as art is brought into question in the first of Arindam's reminiscences, recalling his first inkling of a career in cinema. At Puja time every year the young men of his neighbourhood used to put on a play, directed by an older man admired, respected and known fondly as Shankarda.[11] Shankar angrily confronts Arindam over a rumour he has heard that his star actor is to take up a role in a film, so jeopardising the play they are currently preparing. Shankar's anger is assuaged by Arindam's assurance of commitment to the play and modestly suggests that he probably would not get the role in the film anyhow. Shankar then counsels him strongly against having any ideas about becoming a film actor. He casts scorn upon the role for which Arindam is in the running and then argues that cinema may offer glamour, but it is not an art. Moreover, the actor is not an artist, but a puppet whose strings are pulled by the director, the camera man, the sound technician and the editor. While it is true to say that the actor's domain is somewhat

[11] The suffix *da* (literally 'older brother') denotes a respectful familiarity.

curtailed by the responsibilities of the various contributors to the making of a film, it is hardly fair to say that his art is compromised by functionaries seeking to minimise him. What Shankar fails to understand is the composite nature of cinema, an art produced by the cooperation of its various essential elements. The actor's performance is still fundamental; however, in cinema he must work within a greater complexity of parameters than those that constrain his counterpart on the stage. Shankar warns Arindam that cinema is a business governed by the rules of supply and demand, but again he fails to see that if an actor wants to make a career in theatre he will be subject to similar tides of acceptance and rejection. His final appeal to the presence of an audience that makes the theatre more fulfilling may be an explanation of personal satisfaction, but is hardly an argument about art. To move from the time remembered to the present, it cannot be said that there is any reason to suggest that Arindam's success has had to do with anything other than his own artistic talent, although it is interesting that he admits to Aditi that Shankar "was not entirely wrong".

Arindam first confronts controversy about acting technique when he does, in fact, get the role scorned by Shankar and finds himself working in his first film with an established leading light of the Bengali cinema, one Mukunda Lahiri. Mukunda has been able to carve out such a reputation for himself that no one, not even directors, will dare to question or criticise him. During a take, he criticises Arindam's realistic style of acting, berating him in front of all the company and crew. Arindam's embarrassment is profound, but for the moment what is relevant is the disputation about technique. Mukunda is obviously of the old school that cultivates performing, albeit obviously and even extravagantly, in preference to realistic interpretation.

(The belief that 'acting' means behaving quite differently from the way in which people would normally behave under a given set of circumstances finds expression in so much of the

inferior cinema and television that continue to claim popularity long after the making of *Nayak*. It is not unreasonable to suggest, however, that contrived acting is closer to the Bengali performing arts tradition than is realism, a philosophy of acting whose origins are more Western than Indian. For centuries Bengalis of all walks of life have been entertained by *jatra*, a highly popular and well developed folk theatre that plays to enormous audiences, often in the open air. With very basic accoutrements and minimal technical assistance, such a form of performance relies heavily on exaggeration; any degree of subtlety in movement, gesture or vocal delivery would surely be missed. Working in the Bengali cinema of the nineteen-fifties and 'sixties were many actors and directors, including luminaries such as Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, who had been involved during the nineteen-forties in the Indian People's Theatre Association, a kind of *jatra* under the auspices of the Communist Party of India. Many of these artistes did not, for on reason or another, embrace realism and so kept the flame of exaggerated performance burning. One might note the prominence of contrived acting in the films of Ray's contemporary, Ritwik Ghatak, films which are marked by strong inclinations toward melodrama and, in large part, blemished by frequent and often extensive eruptions of histrionic extravagance. Acting in the films of Mrinal Sen, however, does not betray these traditional influences but is every bit as realistic as the performances in Ray's films.)

On the question of how to act, Arindam—like Ray—is a convinced realist. However, as a relative novice, he defers to Mukunda out of respect for the man's seniority and reputation. In his eyes his scenes with Mukunda suffer for this deference and he pledges himself not to compromise with inferior acting ever again. It is not a personal conflict but purely a professional one. To Arindam it is simple: any flamboyance of voice or gesture in front of all the technical assistance of cinema would be exaggerated ten times over.

Arindam's third troubling recollection comes from his erstwhile friendship with Biresh, a student of political science. When Biresh used to go about addressing meetings of workers, Arindam would go with him, but only for the ride, preferring to keep in the background during Biresh's harangues and study his lines for whatever play he might have been rehearsing at the time. For some reason or other Biresh had gone out of Arindam's life for some years but unexpectedly came back into it once Arindam was obviously starting to show signs of success in his screen career. Biresh tricks Arindam into going to a meeting of disaffected workers and, when they get there, expects Arindam to address the workers with some expression of encouragement. Arindam refuses, and so ends his friendship with Biresh.

In India there is nothing odd about film stars getting involved in politics. Many have found themselves elected to state legislatures or even the central parliament; some even have become state chief ministers.[12] Thus, for Arindam to say a few words to a workers' meeting would hardly have been controversial. Nevertheless, to refuse is as much his as anyone else's right. Arindam, though, is not standing on the principle of his democratic rights. He offers Biresh money for his cause but flatly refuses to accede to his request. He cannot explain his fear, as he puts it to Aditi in their interview, but given that he is one who feels the need to be all things to all people, it is probably the fear of being seen to be partial to a cause, so running the risk of minimising his popularity by alienating those opposed to that cause; for him, neutrality is a defence. Biresh's anger and disappointment are plain, and perhaps this, along with the unexplained fear, is why the incident has stayed as a thorn in Arindam's mind all these years. Biresh, however, had been quite prepared to use Arindam, even to the point of dissimulation in

[12] Most notable have been N. T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh and M. G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu.

that he asks Arindam to drive him somewhere but does not make the destination or the purpose plain to him. There is no reason why Arindam should conflate his professional self with his private one; there is no reason why any actor should allow his own public image to serve the interests of someone else. The fact that Arindam has worried about this for so long says more about his sensitivity than his morality.

There is nothing more to be said about Biresh, but the reminiscences of Shankar and Mukunda are taken a little further. At the time of one Durga Puja Shankar suddenly drops dead. We then see Arindam as one of the bearers of his bier and, later, beside the fire at the cremation ground. Arindam feels the loss of his late mentor very keenly and, despite the momentous disagreement between the two of them, Arindam's admiration for Shankar has never diminished. The most obvious feature of Shankar that comes out of Arindam's recollection is his strong commitment to his principles and ideals, and Arindam's admiration for him must have taken into account this dedication.

There is a second reminiscence of Mukunda at a time when Arindam has established himself as a highly successful leading light in the film industry. Mukunda comes to Arindam's flat quite late one night seeking whisky and professional favour. In contrast to his earlier arrogance he now defers to Arindam. The sad fact is that Mukunda's career never reached the heights touched by Arindam—held in check, no doubt, by his technical limitations as an actor—and is now in sharp decline due to his dependence on alcohol. Arindam's inability to help him is not an expression of revenge for his own shabby treatment at Mukunda's hands all those years ago, although it would be very easy to jump to that conclusion. Indeed, Arindam receives something of a jolt when the word 'revenge' is suggested by Aditi. Perhaps he is sensitive to the possibility of its appropriateness. Nevertheless, it is just as fair to suggest that Arindam has maintained enough of Shankar's strength of

principle to see that an actor of negligible talent (despite his reputation) and a weakness for the bottle is a professional liability. This is an example of Arindam's integrity extending beyond mere personalities, just as it had, even to his own lingering discomfort, with Biresh.

There is one other personal recollection which is solely to do with Arindam's character and little if anything to do with Ray's broader interest in cinema and its worth. Late one night a very attractive and evidently flirtatious young woman shows up at Arindam's flat, full of self-assurance and bluntly demanding the female lead in his present film. He would rather be in bed as he has to work the next morning, but he gives the girl, whose name is Pramila, a courteous though cool reception, pointing out to her that the role has already been cast. Her demeanour is quite open and what she would do to satisfy her ambition is obvious. Although Arindam might be interpreted as betraying interest when he asks her if she is married, he does end the interview without accepting the girl's barely concealed sexual bribe and without hurting another actress.

There are two dream sequences which Ray uses to give further insight into Arindam, particularly his concern for what others think of him. The value of dream sequences in cinema, especially realist cinema, may be seriously questioned, but in this case they are simply unnecessary and appear more as a creative indulgence than an organic element of the film. In the first sequence Arindam is seen frolicking amid vast piles of paper cash. After a few moments his delight turns to apparent concern as he looks about him and sees nothing other than money—nothing else at all. From somewhere in this desert of money a telephone rings, the receiver supported by a skeletal hand, an image that suddenly replicates itself among the heaps of cash. Arindam is now frightened; then, as we hear the funereal tune *Hari bol*, he falls into a morass of banknotes which, like quicksand, drags him down. Out of nowhere Shankar appears

on a motor cycle, dressed in theatrical costume, his make-up caked and cracking. He reaches out his hand to help, but not quite far enough. As Arindam sinks into the mire, he wakes from his dream in a state of obvious unease.

In the second sequence Arindam is seen running through a forest at night past a huge billboard advertising him and Pramila in his latest film. He keeps on calling her name and is drawn on by her laughter. As he goes through a large door, the clock starts striking twelve. Men and women are seen sitting all about, most of them wearing dark glasses. A man gets up from a table, identifies himself as Pramila's husband and curses Arindam as a scoundrel. Arindam throws a punch at the man, so suggesting what might have been the events that gave rise to the unwanted publicity in that morning's newspapers.

These two gratuitous dream sequences tell us little that we do not already know. The first one is an indication of Arindam's ongoing concern for what other people think of him. The dream does not suggest that Arindam is obsessed with wealth, but rather addresses the charge that people like Shankar have made, that wealth is all cinema has to offer. When we see Arindam in a medium close shot surveying the desert of money, money is all he sees; that there is nothing else is reason for the look of obvious misgiving on his face—hardly the reaction of one who is only in it for the money. The wealth piled up on the dry bones of unheard voices is more an accusatory metaphor of Shankar and his ilk rather than an insight Arindam has into himself, something which is underlined by the prompt theatrical appearance of Shankar and his uncompromising withholding of salvation from one whom he considers to have become irredeemable. Arindam's reminiscence sequence says all that needs to be said concerning the seeds of doubt about himself planted by Shankar; if that had to be enhanced at all, the dream sequence is a very heavy-handed way of doing it. The same can be said for the Pramila dream, which serves only to suggest what might

have followed on from the Pramila meeting and what might have happened in the nightclub, none of which is of any real importance. The recollection of the late night meeting with the coquettish Pramila is sufficient in itself; what it is shown to *perhaps* lead on to is superfluous.

The last meeting between Aditi and Arindam, before their exchange of parting pleasantries when the train reaches Delhi, does take up the matter of a married woman and an unfavourable newspaper report in what is, briefly, the film's one dramatic highpoint. After his disturbing dream of Pramila and the nightclub incident Arindam takes to the bottle, downing, improbable as it may seem, the best part of a bottle of brandy in a very short time. Having discarded the empty bottle his demons are still at work, and he sends the steward to ask Miss Sen Gupta to join him in the corridor for a moment. He tells her that he wants to say something about a married woman and a newspaper report, something that most journalists would give anything to hear. It is significant, then, that Aditi tries to discourage him. He insists: "I need to say it. There's no one else I can tell." In this acknowledgement of his need for her Arindam has come a long way from his initial reticence to talk about "the man of flesh and blood". However, it would seem that Aditi senses a revelation too private for her to be comfortable with, and she turns him away from the details of his confession to his need for making it, impressing him profoundly with the observation that his introspective anxiety may be adversely affecting his work and so causing him further distress. Again she has the upper hand, and maintains it in sending him to bed. In a defiant defence of ego he snaps, "Write what you like. I don't care—modern woman!" She smiles as she watches him return to his compartment.

There is no indication at all of Arindam obnoxiously flaunting his celebrity before his fellow passengers. His behaviour is almost impeccable; apart from the somewhat unsavoury consequences

of his downing most of a bottle of brandy (to say nothing of the implausibility of such an excess), he is courteous, pleasant and even diplomatic. We might admire his patience with the puritanical and somewhat dotty Mr Chatterjee and sympathise with some amusement as he playfully teases the old man. With the Bose family, with whom he shares a compartment, he is the soul of civility. From the outset Mr Bose, a highly successful businessman, displays an antipathy toward Arindam based ostensibly on the unfortunate newspaper report, but more likely emanating from the sense of superiority held by the man of business over an entertainer. When Arindam unscrews a particularly tight bottle top for him, his manner may seem to soften momentarily, but his disdain is undiminished. He establishes his idea of cinema as a business enterprise and then points out that nothing can equal American films. Arindam grasps the chance to talk about art rather than business, observing that "we have learned everything about acting from them". But Bose is unable to contain his contempt for Arindam's profession, declaring that Indian filmmakers are concerned only with quantity and not quality. With a clever though probably too subtle remark about the need to resort to family planning, Arindam leaves the compartment. Unlike Bose, his wife and daughter are declared admirers of Arindam and his films, having seen all but his latest, which they missed due to Bulbul's illness, but in no way do they appear as tediously adulatory film-fans. Quite some time passes before the request is made for Arindam's autograph, which he graciously offers inscribed on one of his publicity photographs. There is a touching moment when Arindam returns to the compartment after downing his surfeit of brandy and collapses onto his bunk, falling asleep immediately in an ungainly posture with one leg hanging over the side; Mrs Bose somewhat maternally lifts his leg up onto the bunk so that he might sleep more comfortably.

Apart from Aditi, Arindam has nothing really to do with any of the other passengers except for a brief exchange with Mrs

Sarkar, who expresses to him her desire to work in films and asks him to help her get started. Arindam shows himself to be a stickler for propriety and tells her to ask her husband to approach him with the same request. When she does speak to her husband about it, he flatly refuses.

There is a connection between this refusal, Bose's disdain for Arindam and Chatterjee's quaint censoriousness of cinema, and that is the popular perception of film people as having loose morals. As far as Bose and Sarkar are concerned their attitudes are marked by hypocrisy. Notwithstanding Bose's pompous 'scandal is scandal' dictum, he is quite content to leave his wife and sick daughter alone for almost all of the journey while he is pandered to by Sarkar, takes an undue interest in Sarkar's very attractive wife and tries to arrange for her to visit him in Delhi; he also gets himself rather drunk playing chess with Sarkar in the evening. And yet, when he twice passes Arindam and Aditi engaged in conversation in the corridor, his look of disapproval is obvious. Sarkar quite shamelessly tries to cajole his wife into playing along with Bose's fancy for her, using her sexual appeal to another—married—man for the sake of the business deal he is desperate to win from Bose. Although both men express contempt for the 'immoral' world of cinema, Arindam comes out quite favourably in comparison with them in the light of their own all too evident moral laxity.

Ray's satirical interest in shady holy men seen in varying degrees in other films[13] is also given some latitude here. A baba shares the Sarkar compartment and for most of the film is merely seen, perhaps giving rise to an element of mystery. Late in the piece he is shown dousing himself with perfume as Bose and Sarkar bibulously play chess, presumably to ward off the same evil fumes that would give nausea to Mr Chatterjee. In the morning, not long before the train is due to reach Delhi, he

[13] Viz. *Kapurush O Mahapurush, Sonar Kella, Jay Baba Felunath.*

expresses a wish to talk business with Sarkar concerning the advertising account for his enterprise WWWW—or World Wide Will Water—dedicated to the realisation of desirable ends by concerted willpower. The baba would seem to be a mildly amusing digression, but his short dialogue with Sarkar at the end of the film offers a facetious twist on Shankar's contempt for the mercenary nature of cinema to suggest that there is nothing, really, that cannot be turned into a commodity.

The film ends, naturally and logically, with a tying up of the loose ends of the brief relationship between Arindam and Aditi. The next morning, as they prepare to depart, he complains to her of a new kind of discomfort:

> ARINDAM: I feel a sense of emptiness inside, a feeling of missing something.
> ADITI: Why is that?
> ARINDAM: I'll probably not meet you again.

As once again he expresses his lingering concern about his professional life, she takes the notes of her interview with him from her bag and tears them up.

> ARINDAM: You'll write it from memory?
> ADITI: I'll keep it in my memory.

It is a lovely ending to their brief acquaintance. A cynic might say that she discards the interview as worthless, but then why would she want to keep it in her memory? Quite clearly, Aditi feels a strong sympathy for a talented but insecure man. It may be that the interview would "destroy his market", but it is more likely that Aditi is too decent a woman to cross the thin line between publicity and privacy. After all, the interview has served its purpose: Arindam has given voice to his demons, having expressed his inner anguish to a sympathetic but in no way fawning listener.

And so they all go their separate ways. Mrs Bose will always treasure those moments when she shared a compartment with

Arindam Mukherjee while her husband was busy elsewhere, and Bulbul will always treasure the star's autographed picture. Sarkar will chase the thirty thousand rupees offered by WWWW, and Mrs Sarkar will go on being his bored wife. And Arindam and Aditi? The final shots are telling. The actor gets down from the train to be garlanded by another crowd of ardent admirers and he appears to be in his element being pleasant before them. He notices Aditi and the gentleman who has come to meet her walking by, but she does not notice Arindam or even the crowd gathered around him. He seems slightly disconcerted watching her go, but the rest of her life has already begun and he is not part of it.

It is possible to draw some parallels between *Nayak* and *Kanchanjungha*, and as the two films were made within a short time of one another it is worth trying to do so. The form of both is similar, with the series of relatively brief episodes providing the structure of the two films. In *Kanchanjungha* this soap-opera concept of form is integrally sustained by the visual beauty of the setting, but in *Nayak* the interior of a train is, by comparison, severely limited in visual appeal. Isolation is an essential element in both, but in comparison with the infinitely free and romantic atmosphere of the isolated hill station, the train prescribes a dull confinement, necessitating so much 'talking-heads' composition, especially in those discussions between Arindam and Aditi sitting at either side of a table beside a window.

Both films were made from Ray's own stories. In terms of plot little happens; both stories are slight and uneventful. Their value lies, however, in their facility to raise and discuss issues, and in this regard it must be said that *Nayak* is indeed inferior to *Kanchanjungha.* The wider issues that it raises about cinema and the actor are not explored in any real depth, and character interaction—by comparison quite complex in the earlier film—is conceived largely to advance interest in the protagonist, so

limiting whatever substance might emanate from it. *Nayak* misses the chance to explore more deeply what could have become important issues, while the Arindam psychology is not probed in enough depth to give it significant interest until near the end of the film. *Nayak* remains, then, a well-made and enjoyable piece of cinema confectionery.

As in *Kanchanjungha* and *Nayak,* in *Aranyer Din Ratri* Ray again locates his characters in isolation from their accustomed habitat, setting them into relief with the aim of showing something of a generation set adrift, an aim that is not fully realised, however, given the microcosmic focus of the film. The film is concerned with interactions rather than with plot, and whatever elements of story do emerge are the incidental products of these interactions. However, one may wonder at the point of *Aranyer Din Ratri,* a film which seems more like an academic exercise than an aspect of a remarkable artist's insight into life. If we suggest that it is to show the internal frictions of a small group of Calcuttans away from the city and their inability to relate to a different environment, we might also wonder at the point of that, given the insignificance of the four immature people on whom the film focuses.

The four protagonists are young men from Calcutta who have driven to the Palamau region of Bihar for a short holiday. Ashim drives the car and from time to time acts as the group's spokesman. Sanjay is a relatively staid character who has a managerial position in a jute mill. Hari is described as an all-round sportsman and Shekhar, in various ways seen as the odd man out, is the group's funny man. Hari is the only one to bring anything significant from his Calcutta life into the film, that being nothing less commonplace than the break-up in his relationship with a young woman. Ashim and Sanjay get along quite comfortably together without any evident reason for their harmony. Hari is impulsive and self-centred and is easily provoked by Shekhar. Indeed, in the initial stages of the film both of them are at each other's

throat over negligible issues of the kind that would incite spoiled children. Their immaturity is obvious from the start, and the fact that it amuses Ashim and Sanjay would seem to suggest a considerable lack of depth on their parts too.

Before they arrive at their destination, the question of the rupture in Hari's love life comes up. What ought to be regarded as nothing more than a passing example of boy talk is given an exaggerated treatment by Ray, with the film's one flashback sequence revealing a bitter inter-change between a glamorous woman making herself up and a miffed Hari who, it would seem, would want to play away as well as at home. The episode has no bearing at all on the rest of the film and one can only wonder why it is given such prominence. One might plead that it relates in some way to Hari's sexual self-interest, which is pertinent later in the film, but it can also be argued that what happens later would have been just as convincing without the gratuitous flashback. Like his three companions Hari is a nonentity and it would require considerably more than an excerpt from his somewhat sordid love life to give him character. If, indeed, there is any such value in it, why isn't there such a reference to the background of any of the other three? The flashback and its trivial context provide the film with its first major weakness.

It is the obnoxious nature of the four companions that determines the way in which they settle on their accommodation. They find an attractive forest bungalow, decide it is for them and drive in, quite blithely ignoring the sign outside clearly stating that only people with a prior booking with the Forest Department may be accommodated there. An anxious *chowkidar*[14] greets them and asks to see their letter of authority. Ashim is not one to defer to a lowly servant, but does offer a token of respect for the man's age by speaking to him with a semblance

[14] In this case a caretaker.

of courtesy, assuring him that he will see to it that he does not lose his job over the matter and offering money to acquire his acquiescence. Lakha, a local villager who has shown them to the bungalow, jumps at the chance to earn some money and offers to procure their market needs so that the chowkidar might cook for them, and he becomes, at least for a time, their odd-jobs man.

Once they have unpacked and settled in, they walk off through the forest to the village. In their approach to the chowkidar and Lakha their Calcutta middle-class arrogance has already grated on the audience and is a disagreeable indication of things to come. Their incongruousness in this environment is underlined by the ridiculous appearance of Shekhar in a loud striped shirt, shorts and a peaked cap of the kind sported by Fidel Castro. They reach the village and ensconce themselves in the liquor den amid the local tribal population. Here we witness the next major weakness of the film.

Apart from Uttam Kumar's more or less convincing depiction of the effects of polishing off most of a bottle of brandy in *Nayak,* drinking in Ray's films has not been handled well. There seems to be a necessity to become foolishly drunk by mere association with the devilish liquid and then to act drunkenness in a manner quite contrary to Arindam's standards of realistic acting propounded in that earlier film. In *Aranyer Din Ratri* Ashim appears to drink the most recklessly and comes across as the most foolish. Shekhar, the company clown, drinks very little and comes across as comparatively sensible, while Hari and Sanjay do nothing to enhance the performance in this particular segment. It is worth noting that on their way to the village the sun is starting to set, and on their way back there is still considerable light in the sky. Evidently they have drunk themselves silly in a very short space of time. Again one wonders at the point of it all. There is no endeavour to reveal some *veritas in vino* nor does the loosening of restraint allowed by the drink

give rise to any significant drama or insight, there being only momentary expressions of petty disputation and school-boyish self-assertion. For the viewer the segment is tedious for its emptiness and discomforting for its inept direction of the acting.

The events of the next morning bring some semblance of maturity to the film. Circumstances bring the four young men to the nearby house of one Sadasiv Tripathi, who is staying there along with his daughter and widowed daughter-in-law. At last some interest is promised: Sadasiv is heard singing quite beautifully a religious song; his daughter Aparna is an ardent reader and seems to be quite intelligent; and Jaya the daughter-in-law lost her husband to suicide. But what is promised is also denied. The old man's singing is given no significance, Aparna's intelligence is compromised by the interest she takes in the nondescript Ashim, and the sadness in Jaya's life makes her desperate enough to make a line for the equally nondescript Sanjay. However, casting good seed on barren ground might well be Ray's intention. There might be an element of genuine pathos in the edging of Sadasiv and whatever he might be seen to represent into the margins of irrelevance, while the compromising of Aparna's intellect and the moral despair of Jaya are both indications of the emptiness of the generation represented by the four boys from Calcutta.

Any thought of pairing off that maybe in the minds of the women is limited in its potential by the relatively brief time each party is planning to spend in Palamau, by the presence of the father of one and the small boy of the other, and by the fact that the men are four and not two. The last point is hardly a hindrance as it turns out, for Shekhar has no romantic interests, his passion being for gambling, and Hari, one of those men whose aspirations are unable to transcend the groin, would seem to be content in paying one of the tribal girls to satisfy his more basic needs, intelligent conversation not being one of them.

However, the two women do add some interest to the film, obliging the four young men to be on their best behaviour, at

least for as long as they are together, and to save the audience from their boyish boorishness. One has to marvel at how accommodating they are. While their first meeting, at Sadasiv's house, is directed by simple courtesy, their second ought to give the women reason for second thoughts. The boys are again on their way back from an evening in the liquor den, even drunker than the night before and behaving very foolishly, as the car bringing the two women home from an outing comes across them on the forest track. Caught up in the glare of the headlights and so unable to see who is in the car, the boys are gyrating in imitation of dance and appearing as childish buffoons, much to the amusement of the two women but hardly funny to an adult viewer. The next morning they oversleep and so miss their appointment to have breakfast at the Tripathis' house, but find on the veranda a box of cooked food and a very understanding letter formally, at least, precluding an apology for their rudeness. The women are amazingly amenable and good-natured—or perhaps they are comfortable in the company of immature men.

Nevertheless, the four behave impeccably with the two women and Sadasiv, treating the women with an easy courtesy and the elderly gentleman with warm respect. However, there is a marked contrast between their behaviour with people of their own class and with those whom they see to be socially inferior. Right at the beginning of the film they make a stop for petrol. Ashim gets out of the car instructing Shekhar to tell the attendant to hurry up. While this might be taken as a sign of Ashim's impatience to get to his destination, it is also indicative of the superiority these young men assume in relation to those of seemingly menial station. One of the few dramatic highlights of the film emanates out of Hari's discovery that his wallet is missing. His spontaneous instinct, which he trusts and sticks by, is that it has been stolen by Lakha. Lakha is questioned very briefly, enough to convince his small-minded and bigoted accuser that he is telling lies; he is roughly manhandled by Hari and

paid off and dismissed by Ashim. One gets the impression that Ashim acts in the interest of Lakha's physical safety, though it is telling that he does not question Hari's interpretation of events. In fact, the rather large wallet had been dislodged from the rather small back pocket of Hari's trousers while playing tennis with the two women earlier. When they return it, he appears a little sheepish about having done something foolish in front of them, but there is no word for Lakha; he was not guilty, as it turned out, but he might just as well have been. It says something about these supposedly cultivated people that not one of them has the character to admit a cruel injustice, let alone apologise for it.

In the same vein they show no compassion whatsoever for the chowkidar and his sick wife. Assured by the ranger that the chowkidar will lose his job for letting them stay in the bungalow without authorisation, Ashim hardly reacts. They complain when the chowkidar has not boiled their eggs for breakfast and are in no way moved by his plea regarding his wife's illness. Never does any one of them enquire after the woman's health or even ask what is wrong with her. It is only by following Aparna that Ashim eventually goes to the chowkidar's little hut and peers through the window at the squalor in which the sick woman is lying. Needless to say, neither he nor Aparna offers the woman any of the money they have been spending on trinkets at the fair so that she might buy medicine; indeed, they do not even offer a kind word.

When the ranger comes by, he too is bought off by Ashim with a few rupees and a cigarette. The ranger seems the most biddable of the potential obstacles with whom Ashim must deal; perhaps this is because conversation with him is made particularly difficult by his pronounced stammer, a speech defect that serves no apparent purpose. (One can only trust that it is not intended as comedy.) The conservator, however, is a different prospect altogether. He is polite, humourless and direct. In his

case the offer of money would obviously be unwise, so Ashim resorts to flattery (how wonderful the bungalow is) and Sanjay tries a little name-dropping (does the conservator know some immaterial Calcutta barrister?). None of this persuades the hard-nosed official, who gives them two hours to pack up and be gone. One name they might have dropped, however, is Sadasiv Tripathi, and it is fortunate for them that the two women make a timely appearance to provide a bridge between their new friends and their old friend, the conservator. Pleasing friends enables rules to be compromised, and the young men are permitted to stay on.

The women's timely appearance is in invitation to a picnic, at the end of which one of the film's truly dull passages is played out. The six of them decide to play a parlour game, albeit alfresco. The game involves one person saying the name of someone famous; moving anti-clockwise, the next person has to repeat the name and offer one of his own; the next person has two names to repeat and one to add, and so on it goes until a fault of memory causes someone to drop out. For the audience there is nothing interesting or entertaining in this. Indeed, several of the players themselves soon tire of it and are happy to drop out, leaving only Ashim and Aparna still competing. Ashim wins, but later she confesses to having let him win. The whole exercise was for the petty purpose of prospering Aparna's designs on Ashim.

The film certainly has its moments of tedium, but it also has flashes of genuine humour. While the scenes associated with drinking and being drunk are more ridiculous than funny, there is considerable amusement derived from the character of Shekhar, played by the usually obviously hard-working Robi Ghosh. In this film, in which his role is much more dependent on interaction with other characters than in his more clownish performances in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe,* he is more relaxed and therefore more credible, making his laugh-lines funny

not in themselves but as stemming from the one somewhat likeable character of the quartet. There is a scene where the boys go to the well to bathe. Just as they are stripped to their underwear, the two women turn up unexpectedly to return Hari's wallet. Immediately they appear, Hari, amazingly overcome by modesty, dives for cover behind the well. Ashim is caught literally with his pants down and so elects to endure the embarrassment of being seen by the ladies in his underpants. Shekhar is acutely self-conscious, yet extraordinarily funny in his utterly futile endeavours to act naturally. His somewhat oleaginous "Have a nice trip", uttered in English while making some kind of twee curtsy, is a truly delightful comic moment.

There is also a genuinely sad moment in the film when Jaya takes Sanjay back to the house for coffee. It is then that we realise how poignantly she has suffered the suicide of her husband, as she loses all dignity and composure and appears before Sanjay changed into what might euphemistically be described as something alluring. While the nature of her offer is perfectly clear, Sanjay does not have whatever might be needed to accept it. He can hardly be blamed for that. She realises that she has demeaned herself and runs to her room in tears; he leaves in acute embarrassment.

While we might wonder about the fate of the chowkidar and his sick wife, we are assured of the satisfaction Lakha gets from taking revenge on Hari. Hari has taken the tribal girl, Atasi, to the forest for paid sex, quite unaware of the pair of eyes watching him from the dense growth. After their sport, Hari's wallet is highlighted again by Ray, cleverly to show the link between the boy's own carelessness, the payment of the girl for sex, and the grudge being borne behind the eyes in whose direction the camera has pointedly tracked. To underline the ease with which Hari's wallet can leave his pocket, Atasi picks it up from the ground and calls to him as he is walking away. She is most amused, waving it at him and teasing him with it; however, his

sense of humour deserts him and he snatches it roughly from her and unceremoniously strides off. It is then that Lakha gets his chance. Striking Hari from behind with a bamboo rod he fells him, knocking the sense out of him. Once again the wallet is dislodged and this time Lakha does commit the crime for which he has not yet been exonerated.

Ray makes no apology for his four Calcuttan tourists. To any claim that he is displaying them more for their failures than their virtues, it might easily be countered that in the case of such young men, character exploration has been exhausted very early in the film, quite credibly revealing them—with the possible exception, to some extent, of Shekhar—to be lacking in the basic strengths which make people comfortably positive in one another's company and in whatever new environment they may find themselves. In short, they are unremarkable, inconsequential and particularly childish people whose sense of their own importance is grossly exaggerated. Their behaviour is dictated by self-interest, their values are self-advancing, and their class consciousness sullies their relations with others. The two women, themselves not much more remarkable but at least somewhat more mature and decent, offer an ameliorating effect, saving the film from descending into crassness and crudity.

The film, with a little comedy, minimal drama, and no plot to speak of, is a simple exposure of bourgeois manners brought into sharp relief by a change in context. In many of Ray's films the environment is a vital element in the overall intricacy of the work, but in *Aranyer Din Ratri* the forest is more akin to the train in *Nayak* than to Darjeeling in *Kanchanjungha* or the Kalighat flat in *Mahanagar*. The opening titles are displayed as stencils over forest, suggesting a greater significance of the natural environment than is actually given. Most of the shots of the walks through the forest as the boys go to and from the village are medium or close shots, concentrating on the characters themselves and leaving their environment to be incidental or

simple background. (Shekhar's incongruous getup in the first of these walks is so obvious as to make the forest irrelevant to its striking anomalousness.) Certain playing spaces, such as the liquor den or the chowkidar's house, are given a feeling of detachment by not being established in the context of their wider environments. The assault on Hari, indeed, is visually interesting in that its spatial context, so late in the film, is relatively novel. While it is unfair to criticise a filmmaker for what he does *not* do, one cannot help feeling that Ray undervalued the potential of the natural environment in this film.

The urban middle class is presented in a variety of ways in these four of the eleven films made in the 'sixties. In the Calcutta triptych of the 'seventies his examination of this class would be more concentrated, more detailed and more open-ended. However, with *Kanchanjungha* and *Mahanagar* his interest in contemporary society was established, not so much as a context for whatever stories he might have had to tell, but as a well for intelligent and constructive criticism of the world in which he lived. These are the two benchmark films that raised issues of vital concern for a city once looked up to as the cultural leader of India, and the cinema became a forum for the elevation of discussion of national identity and responsibility, the equal place of women in modern society and the relevance or otherwise of traditional values. In *Nayak* there is still an echoing of this discussion, partly superseded by a critical examination of the place cinema has in contemporary culture. Lest society's gods be too easily appointed, Ray's hero here is a troubled and partially flawed character. In the last social film before the triptych the four focal characters offer a premonition of a feeling of pessimism concerning the younger generation, while in the triptych the finger of blame will turn to point not at them but at their elders.

5 The Calcutta Triptych: *Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha, Jana Aranya*

Calcutta, like most of the world's great metropolises, is what one makes of it. It is a remarkably unpredictable city, where one is teased by the constant challenge of the unforeseen. It has structure and order behind a veneer of apparent chaos; things happen, but in their own time. Calcutta may be often infuriating, but it is never boring. One of the best descriptions of this erstwhile Second City of Empire can be seen in the opening ten minutes or so of Mrinal Sen's 1967 classic, *Bhuvan Shome,* where the constantly vibrant city is shown as busy, crowded, commercial, intellectual, cultural, sporting, rich, poor, comfortable, unpleasant—indeed, the usual things that might be said to characterise most cities. It is important to note that Calcuttans are fiercely proud of their Bengali culture and its values and that they are a vigorously political people; hence they give to their city a volatility that is not so characteristic of many other major cities of the world. Yet when Sen made *Bhuvan Shome,* Calcutta was somewhat easier to live in than it was to be

when Satyajit Ray made *Pratidwandi* three years later. In the early seventies the war of liberation in East Pakistan would unleash a huge wave of migration from the new nation of Bangladesh into an already crowded Calcutta that would not be able to readily absorb the sudden increase in population and all the social and economic difficulties that would come with it. But before the Bangladesh war, a sustained attack on privilege, inequality and corruption was launched in West Bengal. This was the Naxalite Movement, a revolutionary leftist insurrection led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), founded in 1967 after the land reform agitation in Naxalbari in north Bengal, and went on for some years until it was put down finally by ferocious state opposition in the late 1970s.[1]

The Naxalites pursued a focussed campaign initially in West Bengal but later in other parts of India as well. However, Naxalism in Bengal should also be seen in the context of the vast wave of international protest sweeping the world in the 1960s and '70s that centred on American aggression in Vietnam, but which also denounced such things as apartheid in South Africa and nuclear arms, as well as expressing antagonism towards capitalism, privilege and neo-colonialism, no matter how vaguely defined they may have been. The anger of protest in Kolkata in the seventies, with Naxalism in its vanguard, was fanned strongly by the various elements of international protest as well.

It is also important to remember that at the time of the Naxalbari land reform agitation, or the year in which Mrinal Sen made *Bhuvan Shome,* independent India was just twenty

[1] There are many excellent works on Naxalism, especially Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology,* Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988, and Sankar Ghosh, *The Naxalite Movement,* Firma KLM, Calcutta, 1975. Probably the best film related to the Naxalite Movement is Govind Nihalani's *Hazar Chaurashi Ki Maa*, in Hindi, based on the superb Bengali novel *Hazar Chaurashir Ma* by Mahesweta Devi and translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay as *Mother of 1084* (Seagull, Calcutta, 1997).

years old. The growing pains of the new democracy were diagnosed by many to have been caused by the corruption of the post-independence patriots—unscrupulous men who had given nothing to the Freedom Movement but, once it had culminated in independence, had been quick to cash in on the immediate opportunities for self-advancement and profit.[2] Moreover, after only twenty years of freedom India was still very much a post-colonial country, with the language of the former conquerors and many of their values and institutions still prominent in Indian life. Despite the clear vision which men like Nehru had always had for India, India was, nevertheless, struggling under the necessity to redefine itself as a free and independent nation. Undergraduates in the sixties, whose knowledge of Gandhi and national self-sacrifice was only second-hand and who were starting to nurture resentment at Nehru's Congress Party for the lack of economic progress that had made their employment prospects depressingly grim, sought in their own way to direct this redefinition, urged on by the anger and idealism of their counterparts throughout the rest of the world.

This, briefly, introduces the context of Ray's three Calcutta films: *Pratidwandi* ("The Adversary", 1970),[3] *Seemabaddha* ("Company Limited", 1971) and *Jana Aranya* ("The Middle Man", 1975). The first and third films focus on the lower middle class of Calcutta society, while the second film of the triptych centres on the wealthy upper class. It is the same Calcutta in all three films, but the once leading city of India and cultural and intellectual heart of the Bengalis is now seen as a city whose character has become diluted in diversity, whose society is in a state of upheaval, and whose citizens are confronted daily by myriad moral dilemmas.

[2] Indranath Roy, in Ray's *Kanchanjungha,* is one such man. See Chapter 4.

[3] One subtitled version of the film has the English title, *Siddhartha and the City.*

Ray's perception of moral decline in society is prominent in *Pratidwandi*, but in no way is it a moralistic film. One of its more obvious strengths is its subtlety, on the surface a film about a few days in the life of a young man, Siddhartha Chowdhury, but by suggestion and reflection a critical cry of concern for the city in turmoil whose leaders would arbitrarily determine the destinies of hundreds of thousands of young people like him. The film depicts the relationship between Siddhartha and his Calcutta, and while the city is never simply defined (as though it could be!) its vibrancy and its energy are dominant throughout and show the city to be a formidable adversary to a young man of little means, wanting to establish a life for himself.

There are three basic forms of presentation in the film: for the most part there is, realistically depicted, the basic narrative; as well there are conventional flashbacks and Siddhartha's visions. These forms generally correspond respectively to actuality, memory and fantasy, three realms of experience that emerge from one another and condition one another. To talk about fantasy here is to refer to Siddhartha's visions; these are his dreams, his imaginings of what might be, and his extracting of memory from context and relocating it in different sets of circumstances, often to perceive the present through a prism of absurdity. Memory is not always a reliable, precise resource, and often our recollection of the past is conditioned by the needs or forces of the present. Actuality often prompts dreams, and dreams in turn presume to interpret actuality. Visions of the future—apprehensions of the unknown—are formulated by our interpretations of the past and the ways in which they condition our present. T.S. Eliot's famous conflation of the three tenses[4] is fundamental to Siddhartha's subjectivity and, along with the frequent uncertainty of the distinction between the real and the

[4] "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future." T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton", in *Four Quartets*.

unreal, gives form to his relation to the city to whose whims his life would seem to be subject.

The film opens with unreality with a depiction of the body of Siddhartha's recently deceased father being taken from his home to its cremation; the segment ends with a shot of the forlorn boy standing alone beside the pyre. One can, of course, describe death as the ultimate reality, but Ray chooses to show this segment of the film in negative, letting the camera pause for a few moments on the face of the grieving widow, to remind those of us who have lost someone close that at the time of departure everything seemed upside down, that life was thrown into a temporary turmoil—indeed, it was all seemingly chimerical—while the comprehension of the actuality of death took time. As the camera takes in the younger Siddhartha (we come to learn that his father's death occurred a year or two before the opening of the film), the film turns from negative to positive, and the face of the young man dominates the frame.

The selection of Dhritiman Chatterjee for the role of Siddhartha was a real casting coup by Ray. His considerable acting talent aside, the major asset that he brings to this film is his face. It is a particularly beautiful face, both intriguing and attractive, but more important is its profound expressiveness, allowing the character to be interpreted by the camera as much as by his action and dialogue. To a large extent the facial shots of Siddhartha create an enigma as his sensitive looks give an equivocation of arrogance, sulkiness or even rudeness, in tension with a more sympathetic ascription of discomfort, reticence or timidity. The film, indeed, is Siddhartha's and Dhritiman is Siddhartha; this is the film's basic strength.

Once Siddhartha's face, bearing a touch of defiance, has been established beside his father's pyre, there is a cut to the city streets from the inside of a bus. The opening titles are presented over this sequence, suggesting that what is usually taken unquestioningly to be reality does not seem to be at all remote

from what we might think to be unreality. Indeed, a ride on an over-crowded Calcutta bus hurtling at break-neck speed through busy, crowded streets can sometimes conjure up a sense of the surreal, while the passengers, silently uncaring or even unaware of one another despite their tight physical proximity can, in the midst of such teeming chaos, remain detached from the rest of the world. The camera concentrates on the hands of passengers hanging on resolutely for support, the speed of the vehicle and the busy road, the difficulties encountered by passengers in getting on and off the bus, the efforts the conductor must make in getting from one end to the other to collect his fares, and the face of Siddhartha who is but one of the passengers riding on the running board. Just before the titles sequence finishes, the bus reaches the end of Chowringhee and turns into Chittaranjan Avenue. Siddhartha gets down and proceeds up Madan Lane to the office of the Botanical Survey of India where, it becomes apparent, he has come for a job interview. Thus begins the narrative of the actual.

This narrative contains no structured story as such, but simply traces the steps of Siddhartha as he goes about his unremarkable life over no more than a few days. After his apparently unsuccessful job interview he has tea with an older friend, Naresh, who suggests a career in pharmaceuticals. He then goes to see a film, but his scarcely attained peace in the cool, darkened cinema hall is shattered by a bomb blast, causing him to flee. He visits some student friends in their mess, and one of them takes him to a film-society showing of a Swedish film. At home he finds his mother distressed by a visit from the wife of his sister's boss, who makes quite unsavoury allegations against the girl. Siddhartha visits the boss next morning intending to put an end to his sister's relationship with him, but a sudden sense of his own inadequacy leads him to abort the interview. He later goes with his friend for a meal in a bar and then to visit a nurse who, apparently, works part-time as a prostitute. On the way

home he mends a fuse for a girl who studies with his cousin, and they begin a friendship. Life at home still offers no peace. He attends another job interview where he loses his temper and turns over the desk of the interviewing panel. The film ends with his acceptance of a job as a pharmaceutical salesman, and he goes off to a provincial town to commence his career. It all sounds bare, inconsequential and rather corny, as summaries of film narratives so often do. Put into the context Ray gives it, it becomes the stuff of truly fine and original cinema.

The narrative elements are given form not only by the syntax that orders their arrangement but also by the way in which they are punctuated, in this case by seemingly dispensable incidentals such as Siddhartha's visit to a watchmaker, by the flashbacks that allow the past to survive into the present, and by Siddhartha's visions, serving as a caricature of a classical chorus to interpret and comment on the world as he sees it. Threading it all logically and meaningfully together is Ray's own vision of a city in moral decline.

In a formal sense it is tidy that the first and last major scenes in the film take up the subject of job interviews. Here Ray exploits the opportunity to bring into focus the confrontation of two generations. As well as occurring in this public sense, such a tension occurs privately, between mother and daughter in Siddhartha's family, and between his girlfriend Keya and her father. At the offices of the Botanical Survey of India a horde of young men have been invited to attend interviews for a mere four positions. Ray's concern for the extreme dearth of jobs available for talented young people – particularly against the backdrop of anti-establishment extremism and various forms of anti-social behaviour – is expressed twice in this film and would be reiterated in *Jana Aranya* five years later. In both interview scenes Ray emphasises the callous disregard shown to the candidates in not offering them specific appointment times, so demanding the presence of some of them for most of the day;

in not providing them with sufficient seating; and having only one fan running to serve a very large area of crowded waiting space.

There is nothing particularly ogrish about the older men on the interviewing panel, nor is there anything especially luminary among the younger candidates. What Ray does make clear is their remarkable irrelevance to one another. It is, perhaps, a little extraordinary that in independent India everyone here is wearing Western dress, some of them, in that subtropical clime, even wearing the absurd appendage, the necktie.[5] As this dress convention is observed by both panel and candidates, it can be assumed that anyone not wearing the dress preferred by the panel would not be in the running for a job.

There is recognition of the likelihood of nepotism when one of the candidates asks if the positions have already been filled and does not get a direct denial, and it is easy to wonder at the efficacy of inviting so many applicants for just four positions. One's doubts about the process are underlined by the nature of some of the questions asked by the panel – whoever the prime minister of England was twenty years ago or what one sees as the greatest achievement of the twentieth century can have very little to do with the Botanical Survey of India.

Siddhartha's interview is evidently unsuccessful, not because he would seem to be not up to the required mark (whatever that might be), but because he shows himself to be one who obviously thinks for himself. Perhaps one or two of his answers to pointless questions might be felt to be a little clever and bordering on cheeky, but what determines him as unlikely is his answer to the question concerning the greatest achievement of the twentieth century. The 'right' answer is the landing on the moon; Siddhartha offers the resistance of the Vietnamese people against American aggression, so prompting the concerned question, "Are you a

[5] Mrinal Sen's *Interview*, made in the same year as *Pratidwandi*, offers an amusing comment on dress for job interviews and post-colonial values.

communist?" None of this has anything to do with plants but a lot to do with conserving the power of those in positions of influence by appointing unquestioning yes-men to work for them.

The notion of generation conflict is not shown to be general, however, and moral decline is not ascribed to any particular group. While Siddhartha might rebel at the corruption of the 'boss' generation, he fully sympathises with his mother in her discomfiture after the allegations brought against his sister Sutapa by Mrs Sanyal, the wife of Sutapa's boss. In a Western country the mother's morality might be gently scorned as old-fashioned by the younger generation, but Siddhartha staunchly shares his mother's moral position while at the same time vigorously defending his sister against the charge of having an affair with her boss. Sutapa, however, casually passes off Mrs Sanyal as neurotic and just as casually admits spending time after hours with Mr Sanyal. She is not perturbed by the gossip or by Siddhartha's concern over it. She is, after all, a competent working woman whose wage is the sole support of her family. To stalwarts of established middle-class morality, however, she is still a woman and therefore vulnerable.[6] Siddhartha's love for his sister and his will to protect her are greater than any respect he may have for her as an individual, and in his sister's interests, as well as in deference to his mother, he resolves to visit Mr Sanyal and ask that Sutapa be relieved of her duties. The question of how the family will survive without her wages is obscured by the urgency, as Siddhartha sees it, of giving her moral protection. His intentions are honourable though naïve, and given that he is no personal match for Sanyal he takes the first opportunity to leave before they might be carried out.

Siddhartha's attitude to women would seem to have been determined by his relations with his mother and—more so—his

[6] *Mahanagar* (1963) looks at the ramifications of this (see Chapter 4) as does Mrinal Sen's *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979) (see my *Chasing the Truth. The Films of Mrinal Sen,* Seagull, Calcutta, 1993, Chapter 3).

sister. His mother has always been the conventional pillar of familial morality, while to his mind, if not in fact, his sister is a paragon of womanly virtue, and it is by his perceived standards of them that he judges women in general. After a Chinese meal with his friend Adinath, during which Siddhartha takes a major step out of middle-class conservatism by taking his first drink, Adinath takes him to visit a lady.

The transition from the restaurant is by way of the New Market and a brief scene with a vendor of birds. It is night and the darkness is allowed to dominate, the effect being to cut off from the easy affability and shared concerns of the man-to-man society in the restaurant and point to the tension and discord of the scene to come. The significance of the scene is highlighted by the particular way in which its beginning is directed. The camera is placed on the first landing of a staircase in a noticeably squalid tenement house, looking down to the lobby inside the main door. The door is open, and an outside light throws the shadows of the two young men across the floor at the foot of the stairs. At the outset Siddhartha's hesitancy is visually evident; even when the bodies supersede the shadows, he shows his reluctance by hanging back from Adinath, clearly uncomfortable about the sordidness of the place and the purpose for which his friend has brought him here. Siddhartha's disquieting unsureness in strange circumstances and his lack of a defined objection prevent him from stating his position clearly to Adinath and leaving. Instead, he is coaxed to an upper floor, where the squalor of the place is further emphasised as Adinath knocks on a door that is desperately in need of a coat of paint. The visual squalor is not especially significant in itself, but does point to the sleaziness—as perceived by Siddhartha—of the experience to which Adinath is introducing him.

The young woman who lets them into a comparatively bright and tidy flat is a nurse by day and supplements her income entertaining men at night. Adinath is quite the man of the

world with her, while Siddhartha is clearly out of place. He says almost nothing yet is obviously unsociable, even unfriendly, and gives the impression of being petulant and rude. In fact he is palpably uncomfortable in a context that is totally foreign to him and which he finds morally repugnant. He is not puritanical; he is simply unable to respect a woman who does not meet the standards of his sister and the approval of his mother. Lotika, the nurse, is indeed glamorous and has a warm and lovely smile, but she has no compunction in letting down her magnificent hair in front of a strange man or of letting Adinath help her with the preliminaries of undressing. For Siddhartha her waywardness becomes depravity when she seeks a cigarette from him, has him light it and blows the smoke in his direction in what appears—in the sudden and brief use of negative exposure—a surreal gesture of unsolicited familiarity. When Adinath answers her call to undo her clasp, Siddhartha takes the opportunity to get up and run, just as he did from Mr Sanyal.

(It would not be fair to charge Siddhartha with moral cowardice for running away. It is not that he is afraid to speak his mind in voicing his opposition to something, but rather that he is probably not fully aware of what his mind actually is in these circumstances. In a situation where he has to defend moral scruples which he has always readily taken for granted, he feels acute discomfort; being out of his depth, he swims straight for the shore.)

Fortuitously he meets Keya. She is a classmate of a cousin of his, so there is a connection of 'respectability'. As Siddhartha passes her house, Keya calls him in. She is at home alone in a house darkened by a blown fuse; she does not know how to fix it and she is frightened. Thus the damsel in distress makes a knight of Siddhartha. What is significant in this meeting is her embarrassment at her seemingly improper summoning of him, while her apology is reasonably qualified by the appeal, "But what else could I do?" Keya's discomfort may be seen as an

unwitting acknowledgement of Siddhartha's own values, establishing her as compatible with his ideal of women. Of secondary importance is the fact that she is exceptionally attractive. As their relationship grows, Siddhartha's fondness for her becomes more firmly established. It is also interesting to note that she repudiates the intention of her widowed father to marry the younger sister of his late wife, so causing 'aunt' to become 'mother'. This may be respectable, but for Keya it is not natural, and Siddhartha sympathises with her distress at this possibility. The older generation, given the foreground at the beginning and at the end of the film, do not necessarily have a monopoly on morality. Ray does not cheapen his film with a happily-ever-after ending that brings Keya and Siddhartha permanently together. Siddhartha must take responsibility for himself and his mother, and so he takes a job as a pharmaceuticals representative in a provincial town. Keya may return to Delhi, depending on whether or not her father marries her aunt. Thus there is a blatant inversion of the popular formula: instead of union there is separation, but it is a separation that clearly acknowledges the possibility of eventual union. Perhaps the likeliness of this possibility is enforced by the birdsong Siddhartha hears, much to his joy and optimism, as the film comes to a close.

For the most part the narrative proceeds through an orthodox, realistic presentation. It is enhanced, however, by conventional flashbacks as well as by some rather unconventional techniques intended to represent the mind of Siddhartha as a complement to his generally restrained actions and economy of dialogue. An incidental digression occurs early in the film after Siddhartha has arrived at the offices of the Botanical Survey. He notices a rent in his trouser cuff and hurries off to find a tailor to mend it. This might be an inconsequential, even unnecessary, way of suggesting a care for detail, perhaps an element of fastidiousness, in Siddhartha. The real point of it comes, though, as we see the

tailor at work followed by a shot of Siddhartha, dressed in a borrowed lungi, sitting waiting. Then there is the first of many 'mind' shots, this one depicting Siddhartha, particularly well-dressed in a Western suit, in a casual pose at one end of a very large nursery. The significant point that Siddhartha has a sense of ambition has been pleasantly established. In another shot a little later the more conventional voice-over technique is used to reveal Siddhartha's thinking. During the interlude with Naresh, Siddhartha's position is focal, while Naresh sits facing him, his back largely to the camera, to the right of the frame; the line of the camera is over Naresh's left shoulder to Siddhartha's face. Naresh apparently cares for Siddhartha's well-being, and offers him sound advice. The voice-over indicates Siddhartha's being tired of advice and his impatience for something actual, an attitude which is an interesting inversion of what will be seen to be more accurately characteristic of Siddhartha—a seeming inability to act despite whatever strength of commitment he might have to his good intentions. A third such shot shows an unrealistically extravagant aspect of Siddhartha's mind as he sits in Sanyal's luxurious living room, waiting for his sister's boss to come in. It is hot and the fan is not running (a situation that looks forward toward the end of the film to the oppressive heat in the waiting-room where only one fan is working). Sanyal enters the room and the Siddhartha of his own dreams jumps to his feet and ruthlessly pumps three bullets into Sanyal, following which the fan is seen to start running. This extreme notion of action merely prefaces Siddhartha's natural propensity for inaction. His placement to the far right of the frame emphasises the spacious comfort of Sanyal's way of life, which Siddhartha might resent (indicated a little later in his animosity towards the driver of a Mercedes Benz), while his point-of-view shots of Sanyal's eyes, his mouth and his hands highlight Siddhartha's antipathy towards him. Nothing is strong enough, however, to emulate the dramatic action of Siddhartha's fantasy,

his feeble flight from the house being prompted by the diminution of his pride by the common-sense logic of Sanyal's suggestion that it would be better for Siddhartha to get a job for himself rather than for Sutapa to give up hers.

There are a number of surrealistic shots that seek to take us inside Siddhartha's mind or to reveal something of his unarticulated self. Three of these emanate from lectures he had attended as a medical student and depict Siddhartha's alienation from the commonplace. The first shows Siddhartha waiting to cross the busy Chowringhee to the maidan; coming towards him is an attractive young woman with a rather noticeable bosom. The cut in Siddhartha's mind is what is then portrayed on the screen: an anatomy lecturer impassively expatiating on the lymphatics of the female breast. There is an element of amusement in this, but it is also important to see it in connection with Siddhartha's protective concern for the reputation of his sister and his repulsion from the nurse, revealing a remarkably asexual attitude towards women. A similar detachment, though without any erotic undertones, is shown when Keya's aunt is about to take a pill for her headache and Siddhartha's mind cuts to a past lecture on the physiology of the act of swallowing. The most dramatic of the three comes towards the end of the film when the applicants for the job are seen in a state of exhaustion, despairing at their hopes of employment and oppressed by the heat and the general unconcern that 'the world' would seem to have for them. This time the cut in Siddhartha's mind is to a lecture on the human skeleton, and his point-of-view shot reveals his fellow applicants, sitting in rows along the walls, turned into skeletons. It is an impression again of detachment, not just Siddhartha's perceived detachment from the other applicants but also his determined detachment from what is happening to them. One might also, not unfairly, read into the shot a political significance focussing on the notion of a lost generation.

Just as surrealistic is Siddhartha's dream sequence, which serves as something of a summary of the problems with which his

mind is presently grappling. After a conversation with Tunu in which mention is made of crowds going to watch satis,[7] or executions during the French Revolution, Siddhartha's sleep is assaulted by a dream of himself with his head on the block, waiting for the guillotine to fall. Having thus established Siddhartha's fear for his own vulnerability, Ray seeks to give reason for it in another dream after Siddhartha returns to sleep. This time the setting is the seashore, the sea perhaps suggesting freedom in its vastness, as well as the notion of 'beyond' Siddhartha's present psychological confinement. The job interview panel are there in negative exposure, a restive crowd mills around a car (alluding to the attack on the driver of the Mercedes) while Sutapa models swimwear in the foreground, quite oblivious to the incipient violence behind her. A firing squad is shown in alternating negative and positive exposure aiming their weapons at an unbound and fatalistically submissive Tunu; they fire and he falls, but in negative exposure. A nurse comes running along the beach to Tunu's body; initially Siddhartha is repelled, but as the nurse turns out to be Keya, he is seemingly reassured. As dream sequences go, this one is both of interest in itself and bears clear and immediate relevance to the film's central character. As Ray approaches the culmination of his film, in which Siddhartha must make a radical move, he employs this sequence to bring to a head simply and adequately the complexity of Siddhartha's moral confusion and fears.

The remaining mind shots relate to Siddhartha's relationship with his sister. Later in the film Sutapa informs him that she is thinking of taking up modelling, and Siddhartha instantaneously sees his sister's face on the forms of the models pictured in the magazine she has been reading. A simple interchange clearly

[7] Sati was the practice, outlawed by the British East India Company government in 1829, of widows burning themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres. Goutam Ghose dealt with the subject exceptionally well in his film *Antarjali Yatra* ("The Voyage Beyond", 1987).

defines their different attitudes toward individual freedom. Siddhartha asks, "What if they ask you to wear something scant?" Sutapa's response is quite at cross purpose with the question. "So what? My figure's not bad." She then tells him that she has been taking lessons in ballroom dancing, a Western decadence that involves the close proximity of bodies that may even lead to intimate physical contact. Siddhartha's vision sees her dancing intimately with one man, and then in a crowded ballroom, so suggesting the public nature of this scandalous behaviour. It would seem but a short step to her taking up cigarette smoking. While Siddhartha's mind struggles with the horrifying potential of ballroom dancing to bring down his sister, she waltzes alone on the roof of their house, where this conversation has been taking place, the night sky in the background. Clearly, dancing to her is an experience of freedom, a clear contrast to the licentiousness that Siddhartha sees it to be.

The film's few brief flashbacks are somewhat poetic in intent though quite conventional in presentation, and all relate to the childhood of Siddhartha and his brother and sister. While spending a few minutes relaxing in an old monument on the maidan, Siddhartha's staring at the water of a nearby pond blends into his memory of childhood days of innocence as the three children are seen running through a wide open rural space. The memory, however, is shattered by the introduction of the notion of artificiality as a group of foreign hippies encroach on Siddhartha's reverie. Another flashback presents a defining moment in the emergence of the future Naxalite, Tunu, as he calls his older brother to watch with him the killing of a chicken; Siddhartha is repelled, but Tunu watches without any show of emotion.[8] The third of these family flashbacks generates a central

[8] One is reminded of a similar rite of passage in Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1986) in which a would-be activist is unable to watch the killing of a chicken but, unlike Siddhartha, overcomes his faint-heartedness to become a ruthless killer.

symbol of the film, the song of the bird that so moved the younger Sutapa; Siddhartha's longing to rediscover this bird—which he does at the end of the film—is a metaphor for his quest for the lost tranquillity of innocence.

There is another kind of element used in the film, which, at least on the surface, might be seen to be irrelevant to the central narrative and therefore excisable. This consists in a few apparent diversions which are beside the point of the main narrative but which, on reflection, are seen to offer comment on it. After his harrowing experience at the Botanical Survey Siddhartha develops a headache and goes into a chemist shop to take something for it. While he is being attended to, a middle-aged man wearing a suit—his dress is meant to make him seem 'respectable'—comes in and waits for service, nervously tapping the counter and apprehensively looking around at Siddhartha. When the chemist goes to him the man speaks secretively close to his ear. Apart from the fact that condoms were difficult to buy in the 'seventies, well before the era of AIDS, it can be safely guessed that the respectable gentleman is married and has no need for such contraception, so it is likely that he is preparing for something illicit. It is a trivial moment, but for Siddhartha the man belongs to the same generation as the interviewing panel who would hold such sway over the future of himself and so many others of his age. The incident is a very simple way of suggesting that the world of the older, respectable generation is hypocritical and deceitful, and one to which people like Siddhartha's friend Adinath, who visits a prostitute and takes money from charity collection tins, may easily come to belong. When Siddhartha catches Adinath in the act of pilfering, he challenges him with, "Look what you've come down to." Adinath replies flippantly, appealing to a force beyond his control, "The whole country's going down, brother. If I didn't go down with it, I'd be suspended in the void."

Also substantially diversionary are the two visits Siddhartha makes to the cinema. The first one is as an escape, literally, to

get out of the heat and let his aspirin take effect. As he settles back, intending to doze off, a newsreel film is shown reporting on the national budget and proposed tax redistribution, something promising everything and likely to deliver nothing, especially to the needy masses and the hundreds of thousands of unemployed youth. The mistrust in government of Siddhartha's generation is expressed by the sound of a bomb exploding somewhere outside the auditorium, and Siddhartha flees along with the rest of the audience. The second visit is to a film society offering.[9] We see a segment of a very silly Swedish film depicting a middle-aged man and a younger woman running through the snow to a bedding shop. As they leap on and off the beds in mildly erotic evocativeness, the salesman follows them about reciting his sales pitch. It is very soft pornography-by-suggestion. Siddhartha's drifting off to sleep is not a sign of his puritanism, but more of a sound critical comment on vacuous cinema.

In this second film there is a gentle suggestion that on moral matters the West is not necessarily to be looked to for a lead. Actually, this reinforces a similar suggestion arising out of the intrusion of the group of Western hippies on Siddhartha's reverie in the monument on the maidan. Dressed according to their fashion, smoking and obviously elated, the group come and sit in the monument and start to show off their newly acquired Indianness by tapping on a tabla and contriving an 'Indian' dance. One of them, in a poor take of an American accent, exclaims, "Wonderful! We like all of you people. You are truly our friends." Siddhartha gets up and leaves, apparently not in any need of international friendship. The Swedish film offers nothing of value to India, and the hippy tourists see nothing of real value in India, so obsessed are they with their own

[9] Satyajit Ray, in the late 1940s, was one of the founders of the film society movement in Calcutta. The film Siddhartha sees is hardly likely to have been one chosen by him.

predispositions and self-indulgence that India is little more than a commodity garnished with clichés.

Another apparent diversion occurs on the road after Siddhartha has left Sanyal's house. A young girl has been knocked down by a car and a crowd is milling around to exact retribution on the driver. It is surprising that Siddhartha should join in this mindless mob action, but his glance falling on the Mercedes Benz emblem on the car would seem to offer the explanation for his throwing a few ineffectual punches. The behaviour is still irrational, but as the scene follows straight on from the scene in Sanyal's house, it is easy to see the connection—as Siddhartha would perceive it—between the wealth of Sanyal and that suggested by the Mercedes badge. Albeit vicariously, Siddhartha is at last able to vent his spleen on Sanyal. His self-admonishment is quickly brought into relief by the look of obvious discomfort on his face as he catches the glance of the frightened little girl in the back of the rich man's car. It might also be suggested, backed up by the allusion to this episode in Siddhartha's dream sequence later in the film, that this gesture of defiance is the only blow struck by Siddhartha for the class struggle so selflessly being waged by the likes of his brother, Tunu.

Ray depicts Siddhartha's relationship with Tunu quite differently from the way in which he represents the relationship with Sutapa. Siddhartha's idealisation of his sister is reflected by the prominence of the mind shots that reveal his thoughts about her and his protective concerns for her. On the other hand, he accepts Tunu respectfully for what he is. The two brothers would seem to have little in common; Siddhartha is a dreamer, Tunu is a doer.[10] A similar distinction may be drawn between Siddhartha and his friend Adinath. Adinath himself draws the distinction: "There are two kinds of people in the world—those who think and those who do. I am of the latter and you are of

[10] A similar relationship between two brothers, one also a Naxalite, is depicted by Buddhadeb Dasgupta in his *Duratwa* (1977).

the former." Then, in an obvious reference to Siddhartha's backing away from Sanyal, Ray has Adinath say, "When it comes to the crucial moment, you do nothing." It is interesting that both brother and friend are employed by Ray to highlight this contrast to Siddhartha.

There are two scenes with the two brothers, which do little other than point to the significant distinctions between them. In the first we find Tunu bandaging a wounded leg, presumably having sustained an injury in some confrontation. However, despite Siddhartha's solicitous concern, Tunu discloses nothing at all about his injury, but rather turns the focus onto his elder brother, quietly chiding him for his bourgeois values, as seen in Siddhartha's respect for the need for a job, and pointing out that his life is dull and meaningless, something which is probably all too obvious to Siddhartha, too. Tunu hands Siddhartha a book that he once gave his younger brother, at some cost ("I had to sell two medical textbooks to buy that"), on Che Guevara. Perhaps at one stage the brothers shared an ideal; maybe they still do. However, it is Tunu's disappointment that his older brother might share a dream, but has no ability or inclination at all to act on it. A few moments later Siddhartha catches sight of his face in the mirror and, in one of his mind shots, sees himself bearded, as a terrorist. It is, of course, a fleeting impression.

In the second of these two scenes, rather later in the film, Tunu is packing a small bag, letting his brother know no more about his intentions than that he is going "out of Calcutta". Probably voicing a suppressed concern for where Tunu might be heading, Siddhartha asks him if he thinks he has it in him to face a firing squad, a concern that finds articulation a little later in his dream. He points out how, when they were boys, Tunu had watched the chicken being killed while he had been unable to. Tunu's reply is interesting, as he equates crowds turning out to watch public executions and the self-immolation of widows

in the past with his own interest in the killing of a chicken. He implies a somewhat casual respect for his own life here, which would seem to answer Siddhartha's question.

Siddhartha does act eventually, striking a defiant note in support of his fellow job applicants in overturning the furniture in the room of the interviewing panel. It is an ineffectual act, as was his joining the mob attack on the Mercedes driver—a venting of spleen and nothing to show for it. However, the flight from the office blends into Siddhartha's flight from Calcutta, as we follow him through the streets and then, through the window of a train, across the countryside. In taking up the job with the pharmaceutical firm he has taken a giant step toward his own maturity. Perhaps the job itself will have every element of boredom that Tunu so abhors, notwithstanding the capitalist enterprise whose cause Siddhartha will be serving. What is important is that he has elected to leave the city to which he has so closely belonged all his life, his family, his friends, and Keya. Significantly it is Keya to whom his final, voice-over thoughts are addressed, as he sees her as his future and his immediate provincial experience as its prelude. The film ends with an expression of optimism as he hears the birdsong that had symbolised his lost youth. We remember that he had been unable to find that bird in the New Market in Calcutta on the way to visit Lotika; now he has found in an insignificant country town what the great city could not offer him. Joy and hope are always somewhere to be found. The film ends tidily, in the way that it had started. Siddhartha's attention is drawn to a funeral procession, a symbol of that other great reality, but this time there is no negative exposure. Siddhartha would now seem to have a grasp of reality.

An earlier Calcutta is noticeable in *Apur Sansar*; a more contemporary one provides the background for *Parash Pathar*; and in *Mahanagar* the contemporary city is basic to the issues raised in that film. It is also basic to the issues dealt with in

Pratidwandi, but here Calcutta has become more prominent, more public, than it has been in any of Ray's previous films, and this is because Ray's interest in this film is more public, more general, than it had been in any previous film. In *Pratidwandi* Ray's concern is not so much with Siddhartha but with a whole class of Siddharthas, a mass of educated yet unemployed youth, and with the older generation who have let them down. *Pratidwandi* is prominently a film about history in the making, and the shape that Calcutta's history would seem to be taking is something that has moved Ray to express his disappointment in the senior generation and make clear his sympathy with those who must inherit a society coloured largely by their selfishness, tunnel vision and corruption. The older people in the film do not come across well: Siddhartha's mother, uncritically clinging to outmoded values, bewails her daughter's career while surviving on her wages; Keya's father and aunt are portrayed as self-indulgent and unsympathetic; Sanyal might arrange a position for Siddhartha but he would be goaded by a kind of nepotism in doing so; the interviewing panel, as a medium of the political and commercial establishment, are shown to be anomalous and irrelevant to a modern city and the needs of its young people.

Ray does not condemn the young political activists who hover like a shadow in the background of his film. The bomb blast in the cinema is not seen to have been harmful—although it might have been—but is a simple reminder that there are those with a sufficient kind of dedication to be ready to redirect the course of history. Tunu is shown to be one such young man. He says very little, revealing nothing of himself other than his active commitment to a cause and his willingness to sacrifice himself in its name. Moreover, Ray gives us no reason to personally dislike Tunu, as we might readily feel an antipathy towards Keya's father and aunt or all those symbolised by the feeble character in the chemist's shop. There is also a suggestion of

discomfiting self-interest in a 'reminder' shot of Sanyal's opulent home juxtaposed with one of a beggar lying in the street, a shot which underlines the vast chasm between the haves and the have-nots.

That Ray wants to assert a relationship between *Seemabaddha* and *Pratidwandi* is clearly suggested by the opening shots outside an employment exchange in Calcutta, where crowds of young men are milling about aimlessly, chatting and filling in forms. It will be remembered, of course, that central to *Pratidwandi* is Siddhartha's search for a job, and his experience of the hordes of applicants for a handful of positions will come readily to mind here. The opening shots of *Seemabaddha* might suggest that the same theme is to be continued; however, the voice heard over, telling us that in addition to the innumerable illiterate people who are unemployed in Calcutta there are about a million literate unemployed, belongs to Shyamalendu Chatterjee, who puts paid to any such suggestion in hastening to point out that he, indeed, is not one of them.

The allusion to vast unemployment, however, is not at all flippant or gratuitous. On the contrary, Ray is taking pains to assert that there are a number of Calcuttas: one city of vast hordes struggling to survive and having no cause for hope in the future, another of the wealthy, who are paid immensely more than they need and have no concern whatsoever for anyone outside of their own class, and various grades of success and misfortune in between. On one level *Seemabaddha* is a light-hearted 'slice-of-life' story set in the society of successful people, with a bit of industrial drama thrown in for added interest. More significantly, the film is a telling criticism of Calcutta's business elite and offers a thinly veiled warning of the threat to social cohesion should their kind of values prevail.

Such a warning is offered against the background of the Naxalite movement that was severely threatening the peace of the city at the time in which the film is set. In *Seemabaddha* the

agitation is given no focus and is given less overt treatment even than in *Pratidwandi* where Siddhartha's idealistic activist brother gives some small though significant degree of human form to the movement. Nevertheless, although confined to the background, it is far from a negligible element in either film. In *Seemabaddha*, as Shyamal and his wife Dolan go out to dinner, the camera focuses on the open windows. Two bomb blasts are heard; the billowing of the curtains in the breeze reveals the deep black of the night sky. On the way home from the station, having picked up Dolan's sister Tutul, there is some incidental reference to "all the killings" following on from mention of the death from hepatitis of Whisky, Tutul's pet dog at home in Patna. Sitting amid the crowd in the members' enclosure at the races, Tutul glances around and wonders, "If a bomb should explode here . . ." Indeed, it is interesting to keep *Pratidwandi*'s Tunu in mind when Dolan describes her life as nothing more than cooking, sewing and gossiping with other company wives, all of which deprives her of the energy to do any further study; she reads magazines instead.

At the heart of *Seemabaddha* is the character of Shyamalendu Chatterjee, who introduces the film with an introduction of himself which is by no means modest. After distancing himself from the socio-economic phenomenon of unemployment, on which he makes the passing and obvious comment that it is the root of all the present problems, he proceeds to show himself as belonging to the other side of the tracks. Significantly we learn *what* he is before we find out about *who* he is. He is admirably credentialed as having belonged for ten years to an electric lamps and fans manufacturer by the name of Hindusthan Peters. He considers it important to point out that it is a foreign firm, and a close shot of the company's name-plate on the wall of its office building reveals the centrality of its boast, "Incorporated in England." This is a clear allusion to the popular view that foreign is better than native and that an association with things

foreign is a sign of one's personal superiority; the film will offer many examples of this quaint popular preconception. A series of shots of the company's factory that employs twelve hundred workers further enhances the impression of Shyamal's importance, which is capped by his mention of the huge export order of ten thousand fans soon to be sent to Iraq and his paramount role in the enterprise as Sales Manager, Fans Division.

It is something of the classic success story of a boy from a humble background rising to a position of prominence. Having established himself as a man of promise and consequence, Shyamal mentions his birth in the not so prominent city of Patna. The son of a schoolmaster, he graduated M.A. in English and for a while took to teaching, too. The shots of him riding a bicycle through the streets of Patna provides a nice contrast to the shots of him during the titles sequence in the back of his car, being chauffeured through the streets of the greater metropolis of Calcutta. Apparently he took to business with a natural aptitude, for he rose to his present position quickly and with relative ease. The company has provided him with a luxurious flat (enabling him to provide another flat for his parents) where he lives with his very attractive wife, Dolan, who also graduated in English, having studied Shakespeare under Professor Bhattacharya, her father. Shyamalendu now exercises some realistic hope of soon becoming a director of the company, an elevation that will entitle him to an even bigger flat. They have a seven-year-old little boy, Raja, who, conveniently, is a boarder at St Paul's School in Darjeeling. Although a letter from the boy awakens a feeling of tenderness in his father, his mother, consoled by the fact of what she believes to be the better education he must be getting in Darjeeling than what he would get in Calcutta, is much more interested in the imminent visit from Patna of her sister, Tutul.

The narrative substance of the film revolves around this visit. Tutul is an interesting enough character, impressed with the

ease and glamour of her sister's life yet interested in pursuing an academic career. However, her value to the film broadens as Ray subtly and skilfully uses her as a means by which we may more acutely perceive Shyamalendu, the resplendent rising star of the commercial world. She has not seen Dolan and Shyamal since they have been living in Calcutta, and so the visit is largely an exercise in getting to know her brother-in-law. Shyamal's vanity is gratified in being the focus of her attention, and she is quite open about the critical eye with which she is observing him. Even when the industrial intrigue strengthens the weakening plot in the latter part of the film and takes the camera's emphasis away from her and Dolan, her judgement on the crisis and the way in which it is handled assumes considerably more than passing significance.

The film moves through three spheres of action: the Chatterjees' opulent apartment, their social domain beyond the home, and Shyamalendu's office and related spaces such as the factory. As Shyamal tells Tutul at the beginning of her visit, his life is wholly bound up in the world of Hindusthan Peters. Whereas the domain of the office is exclusively his, except for a brief curiosity visit by Tutul much later in the piece, what really belongs to the office—his colleagues and their values—also find its way into his home as well as his social haunts outside it.

The Chaterjees' beautiful flat must not be seen simply as an opulent piece of interior design offering exceptionally comfortable living, but as a telling contrast to the lifestyles of millions who are obliged to live with infinitely less. (The home of the Mazumdars in *Mahanagar* is an obvious point of contrast, as are the humble flats of Siddhartha and his family and, in *Jana Aranya,* of the family of Somnath; moreover, we should also remember the homeless street-dwellers over whom the camera passes incidentally but significantly in *Pratidwandi*). Ray clearly shows how the business elite live in a world somewhat removed from reality. Tutul, however, maintains more than a hint of

distance from that world throughout the film. She rushes after Dolan when she visits the beauty parlour, not that she wants to enjoy its services but out of curiosity to see what goes on in there. She is not comfortable in a social whirl, and tells Shyamal that for the rest of her time with him and Dolan, "You go to your parties, and I'll stay at home and rearrange the bookshelves." The remoteness from, let us say, Siddhartha's world is discerned in some of the talk at the party Shyamal gives at home for a few of his colleagues. Most of what is offered by the characters as serious conversation is little more than platitudinous chit-chat—these people are strongly opinionated but hardly thoughtful—and is prompted by the unavoidable reality of the Naxalite violence in the city. There is recognition given to the need for jobs ("but give them jobs and they'll only form unions"). Shyamal sagely observes that "the whole system is rotten," while one of his guests asserts that the hour's greatest need is for a dictator,[11] and the 'discussion' ends with an observation on the nature of the young today as an international phenomenon. Toward the end of the film the great gulf between classes and the inhumane thinking that maintains it are made disturbingly clear when Shyamal expresses his concern for the watchman, Tiwari, who has been seriously hurt in the staged bomb-blast. Talukdar asks Shyamal why he should have lost sleep over the matter. Shyamal answers simply, "What if he should die?" Talukdar's thinking is simplistically callous. "So what? People die every day in Calcutta. Had he died, we'd have sent a huge wreath." Shyamal's enjoyment of Talukdar's brand of humour makes us realise that, to him, Tiwari's death would not have been a tragedy in itself but rather an extremely awkward industrial inconvenience. Of course, bombs are going off on a virtually nightly basis, much to the outrage of the commercial establishment that bears much of the brunt of the attacks. The

[11] Similar talk and opinions by the comfortable are offered in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Neem Annapurna* (1979).

outrage is seen to be hollow, however, when the company resorts to the same tactic in order to manufacture for itself a way out of a contract problem. While these captains of industry clearly assert their detachment from the masses who live at ground level, there is also at Shyamal's party a clear indication of their rejection of accepted Indian values. This is seen obviously in the dress of the men (which, in itself, is hardly remarkable, given the general preference of Indian urban men for Western styles), Ranadeb's acceptance of a drink from Shyamal with "Thank you, old boy" in English, and one of the women lighting up a cigarette (we remember Siddhartha's shock when Lotika does the same in *Pratidwandi*) just before the unexpected arrival of Shyamal's parents, both in traditional Indian dress, to be whisked away quickly into another room.

When Shyamal and Dolan go out to dinner before Tutul comes into the film, this Western predilection, as well as the notion of class distinction, is highlighted by Shyamal's evening dress with a white dinner jacket. After the arrival of Tutul they all go out to lunch at the club, where it is mentioned as a matter of some wonder, rather than disgust, that ten years ago only foreigners were able to be members. It is hard not to infer from what we already know of Shyamal that club membership enables him to see himself on a higher level, exalted by the presence and influence of foreigners. Deference to foreignness is personified in Sir Barun Roy, a giggly and silly old man, who meets the Chatterjees and Tutul at their table and displays overt foolishness in his cloying admiration for Tutul. (Tutul's discomfort here is an early indication of her unease in her sister's world.) A little later Dolan goes to a beauty parlour, to which Ray gives substantial visual emphasis, making clear the vanity that supports such institutions. At the racecourse Shyamal is dressed in a blazer, cravat and sunglasses, quite an equal to the smattering of well-dressed Europeans who grace the members' enclosure. Tutul discovers a spontaneous attraction to betting, and one may give

thought, perhaps, to the social morality of playing with money when, with millions out of work, so many cannot afford even to eke out a living. There is a scene in a very plush restaurant where Dolan and Tutul have lunch before going on a shopping spree, and at the end of the film there is a cabaret scene in a nightclub where the entertainment is ersatz Hawaiian. (Again Tutul's unease is evident in her point-of-view shot of the extensive bareness of the dancer's midriff.)

Shyamalendu's world emanates out of the premises of Hindusthan Peters, and Ray offers a number of sequences which introduce us to Shyamal in the context of the Company. Later, the contract intrigue centres on the Company premises. In the introductory part of the film there are shots of the factory in suburban Calcutta with its twelve hundred employees, and when the contract intrigue gets underway we return to it a little more extensively. Also in the introductory section there are some shots of head office, which employs some one hundred and eighty white-collar workers. While these vast areas of Company service are basic to Shyamalendu's life, it hardly need be said that he is remote from them personally. As he lives on the seventh floor of a luxury apartment building, he works in the lofty domain of senior management, whose leading personnel are introduced to us by an arrangement of photographs, in a similar way to that employed in *Mahapurush*.[12] The managing director is Mr Andrew Ferris, who—and here Shyamal would have us be impressed—is not only an Englishman but also a graduate of Balliol College, Oxford. There are two other Englishman on this top level, one of whom has had to return to Blighty with cancer. Amongst the directors there is Sir Barun Roy, an elderly buffoon who rubbed shoulders with the imperial masters during their Raj and obtained a knighthood, one may guess, for similar services to the foreign power as those for which *Kanchanjungha*'s

[12] See Chapter 3.

Indranath Roy attained the title of Rai Bahadur.[13] There is also the Tamil, Mr Ramalingam, a quaint paradox in his Western style suit with his forehead smeared with the marks of his Hindu piety. Shyamalendu's rival for a position on the Board of Directors is Ranadeb Sanyal, an obviously upward-looking young man who affects English flourishes in his conversation and wears distinctive bow ties. His rivalry with Shyamalendu is first indicated in the waiting room outside the boardroom with an attack and counter-attack of smoke rings. Indeed, the whole environment seems to be imbued with the atmosphere of an ageless boys' club. Shyamal exudes happiness and affability to his colleagues and treats the secretaries with a restrained flirtatiousness. His amiability does not extend to all, however, for when he enters his office to find the fan running he reprimands the peon who has just cleaned the room, threatening to dock his wages if there is a repeat of his carelessness. Of course, the cost of running a fan needlessly for half an hour or so would be less than negligible for Hindusthan Peters; nevertheless, the lower orders have to be kept in their place. What is significant here is Shyamal's ready display of pettiness.

For much of the film the narrative interest is confined to Tutul's reunion with her sister and brother-in-law and her observation of their lifestyle. The viewer shares her experience of that observation and also gets to observe a little more, in particular Shyamalendu's working life and the mild element of interest in whether or not he will get his directorship. The film might seem to be running the risk of descending into inconsequential slice-of-life glimpses of very hollow people when Ray, with an acute sense of timing, injects some genuine substance into the work.

Quite out of the blue Shyamal learns that there are minor defects in a huge consignment of fans destined for Iraq and due

[13] See Chapter 4.

to be delivered very shortly. There is not enough time before the contracted delivery date to correct the faulty workmanship, and therefore the company is faced with the prospect of a heavy fine and an ignominious loss of face in the international market. More particularly, Shyamalendu Chatterjee, as Sales Manager, Fans, hoping soon to attain a seat on the Board of Directors, has to carry some of the responsibility.

A little before this bombshell bursts, Ray offers a moment of jocularity which is also a very subtle sign of the imminence of the potential disaster. After an afternoon's drive, Shyamal takes Tutul to show her the Company's big neon advertisement at the crossing of Chowringhee and Park Street. His pride in Hindusthan Peters is severely bruised by her spontaneous laughter at the neon fan, for the flickering of its lights intended to simulate circular motion has been poorly synchronised, the effect being a retarded, jerky movement. First thing the next morning Shyamal gives orders that the motion must be put right, but what made Tutul laugh was a genuine signal of imperfection and an indication that even at Hindusthan Peters things can go wrong. Even more ominously for the would-be director is the suggestion of his own vulnerability.

Shyamal hatches a plan with Harihar Talukdar, a company stalwart who, after thirteen years as labour officer, is now personnel officer. It is amusingly ironic that Shyamal's strong man should be one of such diminutive stature.[14] It is also ironic that the plan that evolves had also been suggested quite flippantly by Tutul when Shyamal tried to explain to her the sudden pressure he was under. If there were labour trouble for which the company could not be held culpable, it would be possible to deliver the consignment late without liability to fines or sullied reputation. Tutul's facetious "Then cause some trouble!" is exactly what Talukdar and Shyamal agree to do.

[14] The role is played by Ajay Banerjee who is also remembered for his portrayal of the crook Burman in *Sonar Kella.*

When Talukdar assures Shyamal that labour trouble may easily be fomented, we suddenly realise the significance of a seemingly inconsequential sequence that Ray brings into the film early in the piece. Shyamal and Dolan are getting ready to go out when there is a caller, a young man called Sushanta bearing a gift for Shyamal in appreciation, apparently, of Shyamal's getting him a job in the factory. It might seem that Shyamal's altruism was more in the line of self-interest, as it appears that Sushanta's role is to keep Shyamal informed of the less obvious goings on in that part of the company. He is able to report that a major disturbance over rotten fish served in the factory's canteen had been averted, and then Dolan appears looking immensely glamorous and the two go out. We probably think no more about Sushanta.

However, it is in the factory canteen that an incident is created, and that swells into a full-blown industrial confrontation. (It is of some interest to note, in passing, that the shots of the factory canteen provide an obvious contrast to the club and restaurants frequented by such people as the Sales Manager, Fans.) Andrew Ferris sends out a strong message to the workers (from the golf course) letting them know that no decrease in production will be tolerated. Shyamalendu and Talukdar each expresses pride in his own ethics as they plan their strategy together—personal ethics meaning a code according to which one does not go beyond the limit of personal risk. Part of the strategy is to inflict damage on factory property so as to justify a lockout, and so a bomb is set off, collaterally damaging the hapless Tiwari, the watchman. The factory is closed down a day before the contracted time expires, so avoiding a penalty and keeping the company's reputation intact. In the meantime we note, through the effective inter-cutting of shots of Talukdar scheming at the factory and Shyamal listening to some inane advertising jingle, the would-be director's distraction and growing discomfort. The barely concealed delight of his rival, Ranadeb

Sanyal, at the simmering strife is also of significant though incidental interest. But when Talukdar and Shyamalendu joke about what might have been the death of Tiwari, the wise counsel of Mr Ramalingam, urging that ambition should never be gratified at the expense of others, comes tellingly to mind.

What little remains of the film is largely in the manner of tidying up, the most important part of which is the resolution of the Tutul strand of the narrative. Throughout the latter part of the film there have been a number of indications that Tutul does not entirely approve of her brother-in-law's way of life, at least as far as what she wants for herself is concerned. The ten-page letter she receives from a gentleman friend in Patna is shown to occupy her attention, and there is more than a simmering hint that her future lies perhaps with him, certainly not with a high-flying businessman. When Ranadeb and his wife arrive at the nightclub for the Hawaiian cabaret, the two men chat briefly over the affair of the defective fans. They stand on either side of Tutul but are shown only from the chest down; their conversation is heard over a medium close shot of Tutul's face as she realises that her flippant suggestion to create trouble had, in fact, been put into effect. Thus we are prepared for the last shot, in which she returns to Shyamal the borrowed watch, symbolically shedding any suggestion of attachment to him or his world.

A little earlier, of course, Shyamal is rewarded for his service to the company with his directorship. Perhaps it is Ray's most telling comment of all that, in the context of the company, this appointment is not in any way seen to be ironic; to the audience, of course, it is immensely ironic that one should be rewarded for such dishonest dealing, playing with workers' livelihoods and coming close to actually killing one of them. Nevertheless, Ray presents Shyamalendu's triumph as somewhat anti-climactic. Having enjoyed the sycophantic offerings of congratulations from his colleagues, including Ranadeb Sanyal, and the secretaries,

the hero arrives home to savour the adoration of his wife and sister-in-law only to find that the lift is out of order and he must first walk up seven flights of stairs.

Like *Aranyer Din Ratri, Seemabaddha* presents an array of flawed, not easily likeable characters, but unlike *Aranyer Din Ratri*, the characters in this film are germane to a much wider and more serious problem than those particularly associated with the business dealings of firms like Hindusthan Peters. The Naxalite unrest in the background of the film, never actually confronted but nevertheless definitely there, is a clear, historical indication of considerable opposition to any delusions that the Shyamal Chatterjees of India might have regarding their privileged place in society and their leadership role in its economy. The morality of Satyajit Ray's films is clearly founded on old fashioned ethics, fundamental to which are honesty and a concern for the welfare of one's fellow human beings. While the Naxalites might be condemned for their violence, more so even for their naiveté, the establishment to which they are opposed is heavily liable to censure for its duplicity and its vicious self-interest.

Finally, it may be observed that with *Seemabaddha* Ray is making a substantial cultural statement. The disintegration of Calcutta society based on economic class distinctions is seen by Ray to be largely coloured by distinctions in notions of identity. A generation after Independence, prominent Indians are still deferring to British leadership in business as well as in other areas. It would, of course, be extremely petty to be in any way at all critical of Shyamalendu and Dolan for being graduates in English (although it is heartening to remember Charulata's love of Bengali literature over Bhupati's passion for all things English),[15] but his academic background has certainly stood Shyamal in good stead to advance at Hindusthan Peters with its English values and manners, especially its institutionalised

[15] See Chapter 6.

anglophile eccentric, Sir Barun Roy. Add to this the white dinner jacket, English conversational affectations and lunch at the club that now graciously admits Indians to membership and we can see a trend towards the devaluing of Indian traditions. The brief and seemingly inconsequential appearance of Shyamal's parents during the party offers a very simple, sharp reminder of this. Ray drives the point home with considerable force during the scene at the nightclub where the pseudo-Hula dance is seen as a distinct symbol of cultural illegitimacy—Hawaii in Calcutta via America. Tutul's look of dismay and disapproval at the bare midriff of the dancer is an obvious indication that some things are not right for India, no matter how impressively foreign they may be.

The subtitled version of *Jana Aranya* is titled "The Middle Man", although a literal translation of the Bengali title, "human forest", gives an excellent indication of the work's deeper meaning. Somnath Banerjee, the film's central character who becomes a middle man, is a pleasant enough fellow but utterly unremarkable; of far greater interest is the city which contains him, the human jungle with all its moral chaos, its organic dissension, its indifference and its callousness.

There can be no doubt that *Jana Aranya* fits logically as a third to *Pratidwandi* and *Seemabaddha*, given its thematics, the prominence of the character of the city and the film's focus on certain moral problems that concern Ray in all three works. However, there are certain distinguishing features of the first two films of the triptych that have no counterpart in the third. *Jana Aranya* has a straightforward, conventional opening. The opening titles are presented simply as titles with no accompanying pictures to dilute their blandness, and the film does not start until that sequence has come to an end. There is no opening reference to unemployment as there is in the previous two films, and there is no background presentation, abstract as in *Pratidwandi* or narrated as in *Seemabaddha*. And there is nothing

particularly unconventional such as the pictures in negative in *Pratidwandi* or the framed portraits in *Seemabaddha.* It is as though Ray has grabbed our attention with the first two films and is now giving us the most disturbing of the three as a conventionally realistic work.

The opening shots are eloquent and evocative. From the top of an exterior staircase the camera looks down on a man walking towards the stairs through a very narrow lane. It has been raining, and the wet pavement and walls add to the suggestion of gloom. The scene very clearly suggests an almost stifling confinement, as will much of the rest of the film. The man enters a small room and, from a close shot of a pile of papers he places on a table, we learn that he is a Calcutta University examiner in history. He does not go about his work in comfortable circumstances: we can assume that the heat and humidity are intense, the mosquitoes conspire to torture him, and his eyes and the need to borrow someone else's spectacles make the task of critically reading history papers to be a significantly daunting one. Thrifty as ever, Ray presents us, in an appropriate atmospheric context, with only the two things that matter: the man's task and his disposition.

There is then a brief sequence showing the chaos in which examination results are published. An 'official' has a list of the numbers of the successful candidates; milling around him is an excited crowd, noisy, unruly and demanding. Some, like Somnath Banerjee, our central character, will pay a tout a small sum to push through the crowd and make the enquiry on their behalf.

This simple example of disorderliness is significantly placed toward the beginning of the film, for the whole work is set against a background of social unruliness in its revelation of a greater moral unruliness in society. Most significant of all is the continuing Naxalite movement, but Ray also makes a point of highlighting mundane ramifications of general disorder such as

constant load-shedding[16] and telephone disturbances. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that the most common and immediate inconveniences of life in Calcutta have more to do with the government's failure to deliver essential services such as electricity supply and telecommunications than with the dangers posed by the idealists of the Naxalite movement. Ray may well have disapproved of the killing and destruction involved in this insurgency, but his attitude towards the insurgents is made clear through the voice of Somnath's respectable Brahman father who expresses his admiration for young people willing to die for a cause. This contrasts with the flippancy of his securely employed elder son who, when the old man mentions his wish to read and so understand something about the beliefs and aims of these young people, utters a dismissive "Who cares!" The father is insistent that they deserve to be listened to. "Boys who don't get jobs have only two choices—become revolutionaries or get angry." As in *Pratidwandi* Ray is again presenting a Calcutta in which the older generation has failed the young. Here he presents a member of that generation with a troubled conscience.

(As mentioned before, in the three Calcutta films Naxalism is assumed rather than depicted. Except for the introduction of Tunu in *Pratidwandi*, Ray keeps the would be revolutionary movement in the background while maintaining its significance by incidental reference in the dialogue, the bomb blast in the cinema in *Pratidwandi* and the occasional sound of gunshots in *Seemabaddha*. It is kept even more in the background in *Jana Aranya*. There is the brief reference to Naxalites in the dialogue between Somnath's father and brother, instituted by Bhombol's mention of the police's 'taking out' of a south Calcutta gang. There is also unambiguous graffiti on a wall passed by Somnath

[16] Power cuts imposed without warning caused by an inability to serve the entire city's electricity demands at once for any real length of time. It can be said that load-shedding is much less a feature of life in the city now than it was in the 1970s.

as he walks the streets looking for work: "China's chairman is our chairman," a quotation of Mao Tse-tung and the letters CPI (M-L)[17] denoting the political wing of the Naxalites. When he walks past the same wall on a subsequent occasion, the graffiti has been blacked out, the secondary defacement quite simply indicating the reality of disputation.)

The most striking instance of such a betrayal by the leadership of society arises out of the opening scene. The significance of the history examiner, the heat, the mosquitoes and the man's weak and tired eyes lies in the result that the tout passes on to Somnath – a mere pass in a subject in which he should certainly have achieved honours. His father, knowing Somnath's ability and potential, is appalled that apparently "a fool has marked my son's paper." The administration of the examination also comes into some doubt as Bhombol, the elder son, mentions that he has heard that some of the papers actually went missing. The father is frustrated by the fact that the anonymity of examiners makes them inaccessible and, hence, unaccountable. He would approach the Vice-Chancellor but, according to Bhombol, he has been subject to a *gherao*,[18] apparently by a group of rebellious students.

(It is interesting to note that in Shankar's novel[19] on which the film is based Somnath is presented as a somewhat mediocre student, and so the controversy over his history result is Ray's invention, clearly with the purpose of immediately establishing the disorder of the 'human jungle' as well as to give a concrete example of the betrayal of youth by their elders. All three films of the triptych give evidence of a society in turmoil, and there are characters, particularly in *Seemabaddha* but in the other two

[17] Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

[18] Like load-shedding, the *gherao* - a lock-in or besieging of an official by trade unionists or students as a technique of coercion—has been much less common in recent times than it was in the seventies.

[19] Also titled *Jana Aranya*.

films as well, smug in their own economic security and social pretensions, who would condemn the young rebels out of hand. Ray makes it plain, however, that this society is in turmoil largely because its leaders are people lacking in noble ideals.)

The introduction into the film of Somnath's girlfriend, immediately to become his ex-girlfriend, might be seen as something of a red herring. It is not an entirely insignificant episode, however, in that it does prompt us to wonder what might have been after Somnath's "had we gone to the marriage bureau . . ." Indeed, there are several other 'what-might-have-been' questions raised in the film, such as emanate out of the proposal of one Nagen for Somnath to marry his daughter and take charge of his cement retailing business, a proposal that Somnath rejects in favour of forging a future independently. What might have been had Somnath had a more sympathetic history examiner? What might have been had Somnath known the weight of the moon (the answer to one of the utterly absurd questions asked by an interviewing panel and recalling the frustration of Siddhartha in *Pratidwandi*)? What might have been had Somnath not slipped on the banana skin discarded by Bishu?

In a depiction of such a dysfunctional society that would seem to work largely at random it should not seem at all bizarre that a banana skin should play such a critical role. Ray offers a number of shots giving a visual appreciation of the fact, revealed in amazement by Somnath's father, that there have been 100,000 applicants for just one job, so reminding us of the appalling extent of unemployment revealed in *Pratidwandi* and *Seemabaddha*. Consecutive shots of mail being posted (including one letter being lodged in a post box through its rusted-away top) and of masses of letters being unloaded from delivery vans help to underline the magnitude of this phenomenon. There is also a very clear visual portrayal of the considerable trouble and expense that go into the making of one application. When we

note that Somnath—just one of a hundred thousand or more—spends so much of his time making applications for jobs, we start to realise how much money the unemployed are obliged to spend in the hope of getting work – typing charges, stationery, stamps, and the obligatory passport-size photograph and one-rupee postal note; they might even be said to provide a pillar of the economy. There are shots of Somnath's legs walking the streets as he looks for work, and he is given hope by the occasional interview only to be deflated by the ridiculous questions asked by men who would seem to be utterly out of touch with reality. That Ray repeats here a criticism he made in *Pratidwandi* is significant in that it underlines his anger at the kind of quiz-contestant snippets of fact that apparently is respected as knowledge by men of influence. Undeterred by his inability to give the weight of the moon, Somnath persistently walks on in his quest for work until he treads on a banana skin, slips and falls heavily to the ground. As luck would have it, the errant litterbug is one Bishu, a small businessman known to Somnath. As the banana skin brings Somnath to Bishu, Bishu brings Somnath into the world of commerce—and much more.

An appeal to patronage has already been made in the film. Somnath's friend, Sukumar, has a connection that allows him to meet with a newly elected politician, to whom the two young men appeal for help in getting work. The politician is genial and sympathetic to their plight, but offers them nothing more than the predictable rhetoric condemning the inefficiency of his party's predecessors in government along with platitudes of righteous indignation. Later, when things are obviously getting no better for Sukumar, he decides to go back to the politician in the hope of getting him to pull some strings to allow him to obtain a taxi licence.

Somnath is quickly led to believe that he can do much better than drive a taxi. Bishu makes the simple observation, "There are so many trades," and the camera promptly pans around to

show the abundance of commerce in the market and the range of people employed there, and then shows the facades of the buildings in the business district and the multitude of signs that are evidence of so much commercial activity. Bishu tells Somnath how he started off one day with half a dozen oranges and that night had a profit of two rupees. The simplest theory of profit making clearly impresses Somnath, who is encouraged by Bishu to start with what little he may have and gradually build up his wealth. Getting rich seems so easy.

Bishu even sets Somnath up in an office shared by several men. He has his own desk, a shared phone and a peon who does general duties. Somnath is introduced to one Mr Adok who takes on the role of Somnath's mentor (Bishu, we learn, is about to embark on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas, a gentle expression of irony by Ray in juxtaposing the notions of religious devotion and material pursuits). Somnath has his office free for the first three months, after which he will pay Rs.88 a month. It is not long before he is carrying a briefcase.

To start with it all seems a bit of a game, which Somnath readily enjoys. Under the tutelage of Mr Adok, Somnath ventures into order supplying—"Buy cheap, sell dear"—and is soon absorbed in the principles of the business as Adok explains them and amused by the tricks and dodgy procedures that would seem to be part and parcel of it all. (We will learn later, however, that Somnath's tolerance of shadiness goes only so far.) He starts out as a supplier of stationery and is encouraged by his initial progress. Soon he takes home a present for Kamala, his sister-in-law, which serves as a material indication of his success. There are a couple of sequences of shots, again of Somnath's legs treading the city streets, but this time there is a brief case hanging from his hand, so giving him a mark of status that he did not have in similar shots before he came across his banana skin; there is also a sequence of shots showing Somnath meeting people in the course of his business. He does work hard, and for a young man

without spectacular early ambitions, everything seems to fall happily into place. Ray makes an interesting observation on Somnath through Adok: "Everyone will help you. There's something appealing about you—you're so straight." We might also add 'innocent', 'naïve' and 'vulnerable'. (Hiralal Saha, who pays Somnath a commission for some incidental spotting work he did for him, is more realistic in telling Somnath, albeit with a broad, genial smile, "People will always try to cheat you—including me.")

From stationery he branches out with an ambition to supply whitening agent to a big textile mill. This has the promise of grand success, an achievement that would assuage his father's worry about him. He goes quite some way out of town to meet a Mr Goenka in the hope of securing the contract. He establishes himself on friendly terms with the important man, who gives him a lift back to Calcutta. It would seem that he needs a little extra help in bringing off the deal. A little earlier Ray had Somnath meet a caricature of an obsessive businessman, one Mr Mitter. Mitter is a dapper man, busy to the last second of his waking day. At their first meeting, Somnath is impressed by Mitter's showy, expensive watch; later Mitter will try to impress him again with a pen that shows a woman fully clothed, but when held up the other way, she is naked. It is this man to whom Somnath appeals for help in clinching a deal with Goenka.

The film comes to follow Somnath in two major realms: the moral bastion of the Banerjee home and the quite amoral world of money making. There have been simple indications, mainly from Adok, that successful business is not entirely clean and above board. There are also some indications that the moral bastion of the home might be vulnerable to some of them. In one scene Ray presents the Banerjee family at dinner. At first it appears to be a sophisticated candlelit affair, but when we take in the fact that Kamala is standing beside her father-in-law fanning him with a hand held fan, we realise that load-shedding

has struck yet again. (Ray is not labouring a petty point about electricity supply; rather, he is taking cinematic advantage of a common phenomenon of life in his contemporary Calcutta, achieving with the candlelit faces against the dim background an appropriate intensity for this important piece of dialogue.) Somnath makes mention of his potential contract and, soon after, almost of its own accord, the word 'bribery' intrudes itself into the conversation. Attention has shifted to the shady side of business. What follows anticipates the underlying moral controversy of *Shakha Prashakha* fifteen years later in the acknowledgement of business dishonesty as an ineradicable fact of life.[20] Bhombol even seeks to endow it with classical dignity, asserting that along with 'sex' and 'violence', the word for 'bribery' is to be found in ancient Sanskrit literature. The composition in this scene has Somnath sitting on one side of the table on the left of the frame, Bhombol opposite him on the right, and their father in between and in the centre of the frame; hence, he is an easy point of focus for the camera, and the import of the scene is to be discerned from the old man's face. Clearly, he is disturbed, not so much, perhaps, at the reality of corruption in the commercial world—he would have to be very naïve to have been unaware of it—but more at the fact that his sons are vulnerable to it. He refers to his loss of faith on the death of his wife, leaving him only with his strong moral values and his love for his sons. He cannot bear the thought of their leaving him. Here the notion of leaving may be taken more in a moral sense than a physical one.

Somnath's friendship with Sukumar is of interest early in the film but is not developed much after that. It is, however, crucial to the narrative. Initially they spend a lot of time together, sharing the same plight: two graduates, unable to find work and dependent, therefore, on their families. Sukumar also has a

[20] See Chapter 10.

younger sister, Karuna, and the matter of her marriage will, in the foreseeable future, place a further strain on the already struggling family. Nevertheless, the two boys maintain high spirits and Sukumar, especially, shows a healthy willingness to joke about life. His positive disposition has largely worn away, however, by the time when Somnath takes sweets to his house to celebrate with his friend his new state of employment. Ray establishes the material context of Sukumar's life very carefully. He has Somnath come down from the main road into a very squalid neighbourhood beside the railway line. We note the closeness of the small houses, the broken roads and pavements, and the drainage problem. The house of Sukumar's family is small, gloomy and over-crowded. Sukumar has been unwell; his little brother still is sick. Nevertheless, Somnath's visit does occasion some degree of happiness, with two exceptions. One is the return of Sukumar's father, whose unrestrained pessimism and lamentation of his plight causes Sukumar to take his friend out of the house. The other is the meeting with Karuna, who comes out to meet Somnath obviously because she has been told to; there is no smile on her face, her look being almost antagonistic. Sukumar informs Somnath that she is a budding actress, earning a few meagre rupees on the amateur stage. The full import of this will be revealed later, but Ray offers a signpost to that revelation now. When the two young men go outside, Sukumar notices a group of neighbourhood youths gathered outside Karuna's window. He realises immediately what is going on and rushes inside to slap and upbraid his sister for her carelessness in getting changed without drawing the curtain. The incident is a small intimation of the potential of scandal; at this point it may seem slightly enigmatic, but will later burgeon into the essence of the film's disturbing culmination.

The major force in bringing about the culmination is Mr Mitter. He is a man whose business acumen and extraordinary influence are spoken of by all in Somnath's small circle of mentors,

and so it is quite reasonable that the novice in order supplying should go to him for assistance. It would be unreasonable, however, to think that a man like Mitter would do anything for anyone purely out of the goodness of his heart; thus, whatever benefits Somnath should reap with the aid of Mitter would have to be balanced by some kind of advantage to the mentor. It is, after all, a business axiom that all gains have to be paid for, in one way or another. Interestingly, Ray gives a hint of this principle through Somnath's father. One of his friends is showing him some photographs of his daughter's married life in some wealthy Western country. It is apparent that while life in such a place may be rich in material matters, so much would seem to be lost to the family by the freedom given to each individual, so increasing the gap between generations. The elderly men muse somewhat sadly over the fact that there can be no gain without some loss—a principle which, indeed, Somnath will have to come to terms with.

It is in character for Mitter to make a grand affair out of a simple request for what would seem to be relatively straightforward help. Mitter makes an appointment for Somnath to see him in the barber's saloon, and some preliminary talk is carried on while Mitter is being shaved. It needs to be carried on further, and so Somnath is obliged to accompany Mitter to his regular prayer meeting. Many Indian businessmen, large and small, are attentive to ritual and formality in their supplication of the divine for the sake of profit. Ray's moderately light-hearted depiction of the prayer meeting, invoking at least a faint echo of *Mahapurush*,[21] suggests superstition more than religiosity; Mitter cannot be so easily described as pious. He is, indeed, an eccentric character, though one might wonder why eccentricity is called for in this film other than to suit the particular kind of acting talent of Robi Ghosh. He is also clearly

[21] See Chapter 3.

seen to be sharp and shady, characteristics that are pertinent not only to *Jana Aranya* but to the triptych as a whole. Eventually, Mitter promises to do what he can; Somnath must have breakfast with him a couple of days later.

It is with the breakfast meeting that Ray sets up the culmination of the film. Rather obvious is the contrived intrusion of sex into the conversation. There is again the puerile pen that reveals a naked woman, and then Mitter asks Somnath if he reads sex novels on the sly, if he has a girlfriend and if he has ever made love. Mitter then makes mention of Goenka's wife being crippled and his secretary being very attractive; hence, the direction of the meeting should now be transparent. Somnath receives all of this not as a man of the world—which he is not—but at least in good humour. When the point of it all is clearly revealed—that the next day there will be an assignation for Goenka, the woman to be delivered to his hotel by Somnath—the young man's face is shadowed by gloom as he tries to come to terms with what he has let himself into. Mitter goes on questioning him about drink, drugs and brothels, his intention being to scorn what he sees as Somnath's stodgy Brahman morality. What does have an effect on Somnath is Mitter's shift to pragmatism – what other kind of work could Somnath do? How much does he earn now? How much more will he earn if the contract goes through? Somnath is forced to address the basic principle of the necessary ratio of loss to gain. Can the material profit compensate for the moral loss? Somnath, his hands tied if we remember that there is just a thin line dividing him now from the position he was in before he stepped on the banana skin, is tending to believe that it can.

The stress that Somnath experiences in coming to terms with this dilemma is well depicted by Ray. He presents Somnath in private conversation with Kamala. Again there is load-shedding and Ray exploits it to convey a situation of genuine intimacy with candle-lit close-ups. Somnath tries to confide in her, but

she sees only good in him and his intentions and encourages him to go ahead with whatever it is that he has not yet got around to explain to her. Before Somnath can be more explicit, the power comes back on, the electric light destroys the intimacy, and Somnath is left to himself. There is a cut to a high shot of a Calcutta street, busy and disorderly, the effect of which is to emphasise through the visual impersonal anonymity of the context of Somnath's life his present particular solitude. The shot is brief and there is another cut to Somnath in his office, waiting for Mitter's promised call at four o'clock. The phone rings at precisely the appointed time, Somnath answers it and accepts Mitter's directions; his voice is wooden and conveys a sense of his defeat.

If the film's quality is compromised at all, it is during the last few scenes, where the intensity of the drama is diluted somewhat by an over-encumbered narrative progression. The section opens with Mitter and Somnath in the back of a taxi at night. It is a weak scene with too much talk, revealing little more than Somnath's discomfort in trying to come to terms with the new and unexpected demands being made on him. Mitter and Somnath are on their way to pick up a girl for Somnath to take to Goenka, a process that will prove to be less simple than Mitter anticipates. The girl Somnath will eventually take to him will be the third one they approach; hence, the protracted process has the effect of slightly minimising the drama. The scene with the first girl is particularly good, and has a few quite significant points of similarity to the scene in *Pratidwandi* in which Siddhartha meets the nurse who doubles as a call girl; here Somnath's discomfort comes into focus as does Siddhartha's, although Somnath is more ready to defer to Mitter than Siddhartha is to leave things to Adinath. The woman is at first unwilling to go out that night, but is eventually persuaded to agree; however, while she is getting changed her husband comes home considerably earlier than expected. He is a minor clerk in

the Calcutta Corporation, a drunkard whose consumption expenses necessitate his wife's taking to prostitution. It is an appropriately sad by-line, the pathos of which is underlined by his plea that now that he drinks the much cheaper country liquor, there is no need for her to work at nights any more.

The visit to the second choice all but fractures the dramatic syntax of the film by its inappropriately light-hearted and even comic features which make it distinct from its context and virtually self-contained. The scene opens with a pointless piece of slapstick as Mitter is bailed up by an enormous dog,[22] and then goes on to present a seemingly respectable widow acting as madam for her two daughters. Neither of the girls is able to oblige Mitter and Somnath, however, for one is in Hong Kong and the other requires the customer to come to her. And so Mitter must resort to a third alternative, and the taxi takes them to the Lotus Commercial School.

The signboard identifying the Lotus Commercial School can barely be seen in the dark, but we are able to discern that it offers training in, among other things, shorthand, typing and telephone operating. How useful it is in training young people for the present economic situation is indicated by the fact that its classroom is actually a pick-up room where three girls wait for custom, and its principal is an insignificant pimp called Charan. None of the three available girls would be remotely appealing to Goenka—at least, in the opinion of Mitter—and Charan promises them that a really nice girl called Juthika will arrive any minute. Charan assures Mitter of her quality, telling him that she started out charging a customer Rs.50 but now charges Rs.250. Mitter goes off to another appointment, leaving Somnath to attend to the final details, including paying Charan ten rupees for his trouble.

[22] It is similar to a shot of contrived humour in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* where Bagha, also played by Robi Ghosh, is bailed up by a lion. The situation is certainly more appropriate to the later film.

The dramatic highpoint, which would have carried far more effect if it had followed the scene in the drunken clerk's flat, is Somnath's shock in discovering that Juthika is, in fact, Karuna, the sister of his best friend, Sukumar. In the gloomy part light she and Somnath are unwilling to face one another. The palpable tension between them in the taxi is an indication that there can be no common ground of sympathy between them. While Somnath, in rather naïve concern for her—or for Sukumar, or for their parents, or for middle-class respectability in general—wants to call the deal off, she is committed to her trade and the profit she may derive from it. Somnath, naturally, keeps calling her Karuna, while she keeps reminding him emphatically that she is Juthika. This insistence on a name appropriate to the circumstances suggests the notion of a dual self maintained by the girl in the double life she is forced to lead; abject poverty has driven her into prostitution, while the middle-class values of her family demand that she keep her livelihood secret from them.

When they reach the door of Goenka's hotel room, he pays her the Rs 300 he got from pawning the watch that Kamala had given him as a congratulatory present on gaining his degree. She says it is too much—we remember that Charan told us she makes Rs 250—but Somnath insists she keep the extra. He asks her about Sukumar, and she tells him that he is now driving a taxi. The simple piece of information bears an interesting ambiguity. In comparison with the sleaziness into which Somnath has descended, taxi-driving suddenly seems to be very respectable; on the other hand, how could a taxi driver ever make the money that is now in the offing for Somnath? But despite his promised material reward, Somnath moves heavily away from the door to wait downstairs. He is sullied, whatever the likely pay-off.

There is a fade cut to a big close-up of his father's face. In the background Somnath returns to the house and announces his 'achievement' to his father; the half light is especially

appropriate to the half truth of Somnath's 'success'. Thus there is a poignancy in the father's sense of relief: he has been deceived, and Somnath has lost his innocence in being seduced into an ugly world.

We are reminded a number of times of simple morality or respectability—the 'saintliness' on which Mitter pours contempt at his breakfast meeting with Somnath. It is incarnate in Somnath's father and simply assumed in the character of Kamala. It is upheld by Sukumar's parents, and Karuna as Juthika is careful not to sully it by revealing the truth about herself. There is a facade of it in Mitter's attendance at prayer meetings, in Bishu's Himalayan pilgrimage and, we may safely presume, in Goenka's private life. It is even aspired to in a contorted sort of a way by the madam-mother of the two prostitutes. There is a symbol of it in the wedding invitation from Somnath's former girlfriend and of the photographs sent by her some time later, all of which Somnath significantly discards. It would seem, however, that in many ways this traditional morality is failing to hold society together, especially in the face of the conflictive dog-eat-dog world of business. The tension between decency and profit-making is cogently encapsulated in Somnath's dilemma and his resolution of it. He is not affected by remorse but is hardened to cope even more readily with whatever the next dilemma might be. In the background of this tension is another element of conflict provided by the young idealists, misguided as many might hold them to be, conducting an armed struggle for social revolution. In none of the three Calcutta films does Ray give them a sufficient depiction to persuade sympathy with their ideals; his very measured representation of Naxalism, however, does indeed ensure that it is thought about, and this is as far as he needs to go.

In the triptych films there is a very strong emphasis on men's interests, although women's aspirations are given some significant attention in regard to Sutapa and Keya in *Pratidwandi* and

Tutul in *Seemabaddha*, for example. In *Jana Aranya*, the ex-girlfriend, the sister-in-law and the friend's sister, though briefly treated, are indeed of some interest. None of them is really independent and only one of them would seem to be happy. Happiness might have been the lot of Somnath's one time girlfriend had she been able to marry him, but the matter of her marriage was one executed by others. Certainly the man chosen for her by her parents was a more eligible husband than the unemployed Somnath would have been, but would the material benefits of that marriage have compensated for the loss of one whom she loved? When Somnath feels a tinge of bitterness at receiving an invitation to her wedding, Kamala makes an interesting point: "Don't think she doesn't love you because she's marrying someone else." Whatever that love may be worth Somnath will never find out. Kamala would seem to be happily married to Somnath's elder brother, Bhombol, and content in her circumscribed life in the home of her father-in-law, waiting on the three men of the family and attending to their needs. Whereas Karuna as Juthika may enjoy a degree of financial independence, however, she is a joyless character. Her work is hardly fulfilling and whatever satisfaction she might get from it is compromised by her need for an alias. Her economic plight is complicated, in that under traditional circumstances her livelihood and eventual marriage would be assured by her father and her older brother. Her father's wages are paltry and the best her graduate brother can do is to drive a taxi. Hence, she is forced to fend for herself, but in this society there is even less on offer to young women than to young men.

Much of *Jana Aranya* has a close, even claustrophobic atmosphere. Like the flat in *Mahanagar,* which ensures the constant physical closeness of the family, the confinement of the Banerjees' home underlines the notion of family that can be both supportive and destructive. The notion of uncomfortable closeness is represented outside of the house in the crowded and

disorderly city streets. The scenes in cars, particular the taxi on the last night of the film, bring characters physically close to one another while maintaining a moral distance between them. Darkness is a motif, exploited by the constant reality of load-shedding, obscuring communication and equivocating understanding between characters. Some of the most important scenes of the film are played amid this kind of atmosphere: the outdoor ending of the affair, the allusion to business corruption at the family's dinner table, the attempt of Somnath to find guidance from Kamala, and the darkness engulfing the Lotus Commercial School are some of them.

Jana Aranya is an excellent work that conveys an interesting though simple narrative and raises a number of very important moral issues. Its direct persuasiveness relies largely on its being a very tightly constructed and logically developed film. However, one may wonder about the worth of two anomalies. One is the exaggerated importance given to an incidental element of a conversation about selling when a shot of an elephant briefly occupies the screen. The other is the somewhat abstruse diversion in substantiating Hiralal Saha's interest in colonial houses.

As the city is presented as significant in *Mahanagar*, it is manifest as a central character in the three Calcutta films. It is a much maligned city, yet although much of its vilification may well be warranted, it also exerts strong forces of attraction. In *Pratidwandi* Adinath declares quite categorically, "I couldn't live outside of Calcutta." Neither, it would seem, could Siddhartha, though his exile at the end of the film is made bearable in its being underlined as a temporary one. In all three films, though to a lesser extent in *Seemabaddha*, the city is seen as crowded and noisy and operating under a relentless pressure of busyness. However, it is interesting to consider the shots of the maidan in *Pratidwandi* which show an aspect of the city that is all-embracing: it is a place of rest and recreation for rich and poor alike, citizens and visitors. Ray is aware of the extremes of living conditions,

as shown in *Pratidwandi* in the juxtaposition of a shot of a street dweller lying on the ground and the opulent comfort of Sanyal's home. There are, of course, the delusive views of the city from the tops of tall buildings, and in *Seemabaddha* this sanitised view of the city, filtering out from the seventh floor the lesser forms of life at ground level, is more prominent. In *Jana Aranya*, however, Ray's sympathy for the city has worn rather thin. Here the focus is much more evidently on disorder, inefficiency, callousness and exploitation, with the ever-present threat of violence continuing in the background. Here the city manifests itself as a predator, and Somnath is just one of its victims.

Of course, for all his criticism of the city in which he was born and would later die, Ray himself chose to live and work there for all of his long and illustrious career, not only contributing to its vibrant cultural life but also drawing stimulation from other eminent contributors. One might wonder how much more stringent the criticism of Calcutta might have been from one who lacked Satyajit Ray's love for the city.

The Calcutta triptych is an extraordinarily important contribution to the Bengali cinema of the seventies[23] in its frank and incisive depiction of the values and directions of the time in which the films were made. The three films provide candid contemporary social criticism in the form of fine cinema, exploiting the realist potential of confusion, short-sightedness and waywardness in society through scripts and performances that are of the highest quality. And although the films all bear a specific relevance, they still contain immense universal appeal in the underlying compassion of their concerns.

[23] Along with Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (1973) and Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Duratwa* (1978) and *Nim Annapurna* (1979).

6 The Tribute to Tagore: *Tin Kanya, Charulata, Ghare Baire*

The year 1961 marked the centenary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore, and to honour the occasion Satyajit Ray made a documentary on the life of the Poet and a feature film in the form of a triple bill drawn from three of his short stories.

No giant of Indian culture stands taller than Tagore—poet, novelist, playwright, dance-dramatist, essayist, philosopher, educator, song-writer, painter, rural economist. Not only were his works diverse but they were extraordinarily prolific; it is popularly agreed in Bengal that Rabindranath wrote more in just one lifetime than most people could read in a lifetime. Ray's documentary opens with footage of the vast throngs overflowing the streets of Calcutta in Tagore's funeral procession in 1941, after which Ray has his narrator say:

He left behind a heritage no fire could consume. It was a heritage of words, of music and poetry, of ideas and ideals, and it has the power to move us and inspire us, today and in the days to come. We who owe him so much salute his memory.

The acknowledgement of the debt is the acknowledgement of the greatness of the man and his legacy, and reason enough for Satyajit Ray to pay tribute to him in film.

The documentary is conventionally biographical, following a simple chronological direction after the opening sequence in 1941. Ray uses contemporary paintings and photographs and, for the later part of the Poet's life, newsreel and other movie footage. He also has actors re-create, to the narrator's voice-over, aspects of the Poet's early life. There is mention of what Rabindranath inherited from his illustrious antecedents—his grandfather, Dwarkanath, and his father, Debendranath, as well as the greatest luminary of the Bengal Renaissance, Rammohan Roy. It must be some consolation to many a reluctant schoolboy in Bengal today to know that the great Tagore was a failure at school; he went to four schools and hated them all. However, Ray clearly describes the familial situation in which Rabindranath, the last of fourteen children, grew up to show the redundancy of formal education for one such as he. Ray represents the Tagore home as "a household which hummed with artistic activity" and singles out just some of Rabindranath's brothers and a sister to illustrate this: Dwijendranath was a poet, philosopher and mathematician; Satyendranath translated Sanskrit classics into Bengali verse and was the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service; Jyotirindranath was an accomplished musician, a translator who rendered the plays of Moliere as well as Sanskrit dramas into Bengali, and a theatrical producer; Swarnakumari was India's first woman novelist and the first woman to edit a journal in India. At 17, Rabindranath went abroad to study, although he did less formal study than general cultural imbibing, his experiences having a profound effect on the broadening of his mind and his outlook on the world.

Having been appointed by his father as manager of the family's estates, Rabindranath spent some time living by the vast Padma River in east Bengal. Here he came to understand the lives of

the multitude of poor peasants, with all their trials and hardships, and this gave him much material for the philosophy of Nikhil in the novel *Ghare Baire*, which Satyajit Ray would render as a film in 1984. Here too some of his ideas on rural reconstruction emerged, ideas which developed further when spending time on the family property in Bolpur in the district of Birbhum in West Bengal. Here he had inherited some land which he made over for the building of a school at Shantiniketan and later the Vishvabharati University.

Ray shows Tagore in the twentieth century becoming more and more involved in contemporary history, first of all in the Swadeshi Movement in protest at the Partition of Bengal in 1905 (which provided the context of *Ghare Baire*) and in the swell of public anger and disgust at the repressive Rowlatt legislation and, especially, General Dyer's brutal massacre of unarmed civilians in the Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar in 1919. His winning of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 brought not only international recognition, but also interest in his work and in the vital issues pertaining to his country and its freedom movement. Ray shows us Rabindranath sharing the national stage with Gandhi and Nehru and interacting with such world figures as W.B. Yeats, Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland and Albert Einstein. Sequences of shots of the covers of many of his books in various languages give an indication of how widely read he was through the medium of so many translations. A strong note is made of his utter rejection of violence and his passionate concern for peace and freedom.

Academics might regard Ray's documentary as not being comprehensive or critical. To provide a satisfactorily comprehensive account of the life and work of a man such as Rabindranath would be impossible, and Ray's aim, as stated in the opening of the film, is to acknowledge a debt to one whom "we owe so much". Nevertheless, it is by all accounts a fine piece of documentary cinema: the material is well selected, sensitively and intelligently interpreted and beautifully presented. But what

might be particularly interesting about it for some, it can surely be averred, was not intended by Ray—that is, the way in which various aspects of his hero might be seen to have found regeneration in one way or another in himself.

Tagore could never be matched in the extent of his versatility, yet Ray, first and foremost a filmmaker, was remarkably more versatile than most of his fellow directors: he was exceptionally skilled in the visual arts, as can be seen in the illustrations in his notebooks of the plans and designs for his films and in his films' title cards; he was a competent musician who wrote the music for most of his films; he was a writer, who wrote his own scripts as well as works of science fiction and detective stories; he was an essayist and critic. Closely related to this breadth of creativity is the breadth of vision pertinent to both men. Tagore was a devoted Indian who longed for the freedom of his country, yet could never limit his enquiry and his experience to his native land; Ray also took pride in his national heritage, yet consciously and deliberately sought to gain whatever he could from the cultural riches of other nations. Further, both men, it may be said, were as polished in English as they were in Bengali. Ray had affiliations with the Brahmo Samaj, one of the great pioneers of which was Rabindranath's father, and both men have been noted for their profound humanism. It might surprise some to know that the great Tagore, Nobel laureate, wrote primary school textbooks and composed nonsense verse for children; elsewhere in this book mention is made of Ray's extensive list of writings for children and his four children's films.[1] Finally, it might be said that both men were Bengalis at heart; although both travelled widely, made friends all over the world and had their works known and admired in every continent, they chose to live and work in Bengal or, more particularly in Ray's case, Calcutta.

The attempt here to suggest a brief catalogue of similarities is no more than that. No one could ever claim to equate Ray—

[1] See Chapter 9.

or anyone else, for that matter—with Tagore. What is of interest is the indication these points of comparison may give of the debt to Tagore as Ray acknowledged it, and the inspiration, if not influence, the filmmaker drew from the Poet.

Satyajit Ray's feature work in the centenary year was the triple bill, *Tin Kanya* ("Three Daughters"), based on three of Tagore's short stories, an unambitious and delightful triptych. He went on to make two feature films on works of Tagore: in 1964 he made *Charulata,* from the novella, *Nashtanir* ("The Broken Nest"), and twenty years later he made *Ghare Baire* ("Home and the World") from the novel of the same name. *Ghare Baire* is a good though blemished film; *Charulata* is a masterpiece.

Tagore's four volumes of short stories comprise some of the most lustrous gems of his literary treasure house, and with good reason it may be suggested that these masterly works are a rich mine for a filmmaker in search of a story; however, such a suggestion might also be a trifle naive, for masterly works of literature do not automatically translate into masterly works of cinema. For his centenary tribute to the Poet, Ray chose three short stories, each focussing on a young woman. Regardless of the quality of the components of *Tin Kanya,* the limitations of the triple bill format ensure that the films are, indeed, discrete. The first and third stories, *Postmaster* and *Samapti* ("The Conclusion") blend well together, both being about girls on the verge of womanhood and set in rural environments, but the second, *Monihara* ("The Lost Jewels"), focuses on a mature, already married woman, in a melding of a tale of marital infidelity with a ghost story.[2] The central characters of the three films are the simple orphan girl, Ratan, the venal Manimalika and the shrewish Mrinmayi, the first and third, at least, readily identifiable with the world of rural Bengal brought to life in so

[2] When the film was first shown abroad, it was as *Two Daughters,* with *Monihara* being left out.

many of Tagore's stories. Tagore is at the height of his genius in his representations of the rural life of both privileged and common people, while Ray, prior to *Tin Kanya,* had established his own genius in portraying rural Bengal, to some extent in *Jalsaghar* and *Devi,* but with notable brilliance in the Apu trilogy.

Underlying the first story, *Postmaster*, is the notion of dislocation. Ray's easy relationship with rural Bengal is not shared by his central character, Nandalal, who is something of a fish out of water in a new environment. Nandalal, a young man of Calcutta, comes to take charge of a rural post office and finds that he cannot adjust to his displacement; Ratan, the little orphan girl devoted to his service, is obliged to endure the pain of impending separation when Nandalal eventually makes ready to leave.

The environment is a major character in the film, and Ray takes great pains to establish its appearance, its nature and its moods. In a film whose hallmark is simplicity, Ray's genius lies in letting the essential elements of his work establish themselves without any particular contrivance on his part. The notion of isolation, vital to a sympathetic understanding of Nandalal, is highlighted by restricting the extent of the setting to the postmaster's small house and its immediate surrounds. This spatial intensification minimises, even proscribes, human relationships. While local rustics come to the post office, there is no evidence of any world beyond its immediate vicinity. The human element in the film is further minimised by the lush growth of the setting, its silence except for the sounds of birds obscuring, as it were, the affairs of men and elevating the realm of nature. It is here that the fundamental contrast between Nandalal and Ratan takes root, a contrast that is integral to the simple and minimal narrative dynamics of the film.

Ratan is entirely at ease in this environment, yet to Nandalal it presents something of a constant mystery, intensifying his alienation from family and the familiar world of Calcutta. He

starts off optimistically enough, rearranging some of the reminders of his old home in his new lodging in the humble post office—placing a picture of his family on the wall and some books on a shelf. He then selects a book to read on the veranda. His optimism is but momentary, for his chair collapses as soon as he sits on it. Later, when he goes back to the veranda with his book and a cigarette, content this time to sit on the floor, he encounters the local lunatic. At first the fellow just squats there, watching Nandalal in silence. He then crouches and takes a leap toward him. (It would appear from his gestures and postures that he has some kind of militarily induced psychosis.) From the start Nandalal is quite unsettled. Perplexed and fearful, he cringes from the madman, who embarks on some kind of military charade and a frenzy of laughter. The child, Ratan, returns to deal summarily with the poor fellow and set Nandalal at ease once again. Nevertheless, a scar has been left on Nandalal's optimism, and with this simple and brief episode Ray has effectually drawn a line around the new postmaster's blending in with the seemingly idyllic village.

There is to be no regeneration of the city boy's sanguinity. His work is undemanding and the locals offer nothing in the way of entertaining society. Several of them come to the post office each day to sit and watch the new postmaster at work. The conversation is hardly profound, but it gives Nandalal some opportunity to show off. When he tells them he tries his hand at a bit of poetry writing, they are indeed impressed, but when he boasts that he reads English literature, they are little short of amazed. Of course, they are not without some of the finer things of life, either, as their musical evening shows. However, boredom would seem to be Nandalal's prime enemy, and he alleviates it and amuses himself to some extent by teaching Ratan to read and write. To him this is a simple pastime, and he is never fully aware of the profound significance in transmitting basic literacy to a simple village girl with no one to call her own.

Two things emanate from this: a sense of wonder is opened up in the mind of the orphan girl, and she consequently redoubles her devotion to her master. Nandalal, however, cannot be said to be particularly aware of either of these effects. Nevertheless, a sequence of inter-cutting of shots of Nandalal at his work, Ratan getting about her household chores, and Ratan practising her letters suggests an appearance of creative happiness. The film's poignancy lies in the fact that this happiness is to be short-lived.

Nandalal's plight becomes worse. Having, it would seem, somewhat tempered his boredom and weathered the storm of the village madman (whose ranting in the distance at night, however, continues to be disconcerting) he comes home feverish from the locals' musical evening, having contracted malaria. (Here we may bring to mind the irony of the little joke made at the beginning of the film by Nandalal's departing predecessor about the poster on the post office wall advertising quinine.) Ratan's enhanced devotion is made manifest in her nursing of Nandalal, a duty she carries out with selflessness in addition to her drawing water, cooking and cleaning for him. But his illness has enervated him, physically and, it would seem, emotionally; when he has recovered sufficiently, he sends off a letter to his superiors requesting a transfer. In time his replacement arrives and, with his return to Calcutta imminent, there is no sign of his earlier debilitation.

Having exchanged the appropriate formalities with the new postmaster, Nandalal calls to Ratan to give her a coin as a farewell gesture. He does not know that she is just outside, sobbing at the realisation of his departure, something which might well, in a child's perception, be interpreted as a betrayal. There is a shot of her drawing water, still in tears, and then there is a long shot of their final encounter: Nandalal moving away from the camera (and the village), Ratan coming towards him with her heavy bucket of water, the lunatic also on the road in the distance. Holding the coin, Nandalal would speak with

her, but in her sorrow and, we might fairly presume, an attempt to maintain her childlike dignity, she walks past him without looking up. Now that she has a thirst for knowledge, thanks to Nandalal, a customary gratuity is not what she wants from him.

Postmaster is full of warm human sentiment surrounding a little girl. Ray concentrates on two major aspects of her nature, which are mutually complementary—her amiability and her piteousness. Her cheerful readiness to do whatever is necessary in looking after Nandalal and her unaffected innocence in her conversations with him establish her as a very likeable character, and as such it is all the more easy to feel pity for her in having no family and to be moved by her vicarious familial happiness in his family pictures and his letters from home. Her song to him is touching for its easy sincerity, while the enormous value she places on his promise of a simple gift to her—the offering of the power of literacy and the immense fillip to personal esteem that this might entail—along with Nandalal's failure to fulfil that promise, is the pinnacle of the film's emotional impact. *Postmaster*'s quality consists in its simplicity, its candid unpretentiousness and the genuine warmth of its sentiment.

The second component of the triple bill, despite whatever qualities one might claim it to have, sits incongruously with the other two. *Monihara* offers an intriguing tale of personal obsession and marital infidelity that blends into a chilling ghost story. It opens in an air of mystery as the camera follows an elderly schoolmaster, Govindalal Chakravarti, past an old, grand edifice. He pauses for a moment, and the camera concentrates on his face as he glances up at the building with a look that might suggest mild apprehension. He turns from it and goes on his way across a derelict garden, stopping once or twice to glance briefly at a piece of sculpture. There is a cut to a shot of a masonry archway at the top of a flight of steps leading down to a ghat beside the river; Govindalal appears through the archway and, as he makes his way down the steps, the ominous howling of wind is heard. The schoolmaster chooses one of the lower

steps and begins to settle himself, when a voice greets him. He looks around and sees, sitting some steps lower and to his left, a figure totally wrapped in a dark shawl – it is a faceless, amorphous shape with only a voice to give it a semblance of humanity. Govindalal makes mention of the fact that it is evening, a time when this particular ghat, which he acknowledges as belonging to the house of the Sahas, is believed to accommodate ghosts. He shows a manuscript book to his covered companion, intimating that in it he has written an amazing story of what happened in that grand old house at the top of the ghat some thirty years ago, and, with the other's approval, begins to read his story.

Ray has established the house as the centre of the film's action, although we will not see the façade again as the action will be confined to the interior. He has also established the fact that the substance of his film is, in the most literal sense, a story, written in the pages of a book and read by its writer. That the story is to be regarded as somewhat extra-natural is suggested by the atmosphere, the salient elements of which are the loneliness of the setting and the mystery that seems to attach to old, seemingly deserted buildings, along with the wind, the mention of ghosts, and the figure wrapped in a dark shawl. But then all of this might be readily overlooked—at least for the time being—as Govindalal the schoolmaster begins his story.

The narrative may be simply summarised: Phanibhushan Saha, a wealthy jute merchant, has come into his inheritance and brings his wife, Manimalika, home to his ancestral estate. It is evident that Manimalika has an insatiable hunger for jewellery, a passion which infinitely exceeds any tender feeling she would seem to show for Phanibhushan. When Phanibhushan's warehouse is destroyed by fire and he stands on the brink of ruin, Manimalika fears that he may require her to sell her jewellery. Before he leaves for Calcutta to salvage whatever he might, she locks all her treasure away, making clear to him that she will not part with any of it. In Phanibhushan's absence, she

adorns herself with every piece of the jewellery and runs away with one Madhusudan, but the boat on which they are travelling sinks and they drown.

The change in scene from the ghat offers such a striking contrast that it might be very easy to let Govindalal's role in the film pass out of mind. The camera is at one end of the magnificent entrance hall of the Saha mansion, focussing on the front door as Phanibhushan brings Manimalika through it into the fullness of his inheritance. The hall is similar to the one we shall see in brilliant colour years later in *Ghare Baire*, while the ambience here and in the large adjoining room where most of the action takes place generally anticipates *Charulata.* The décor is obviously European in style, a hint of which was gained earlier as Govindalal passed through the garden on his way to the ghat and made brief visual note of a couple of the neo-classical statues there. The evident enthusiasm for Western art is complemented by Phanibhushan's fashionable Western style of dress, again anticipating *Charulata* and the English suits worn by Bhupati in that film. The grand spaciousness of the hall is at first matched by the roominess of the private apartment, and yet as medium and medium close shots become more frequent, a somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere starts to permeate the setting. The reflection of so much in mirrors tends to create a crowdedness in the large room while, in the late afternoon and evening, the excessive bric-a-brac casting its shadows on the walls adds further to the sense of oppressive clutter, the ultimate effect being an obvious emphasis not so much on people as on things.

The strength of the marriage is simply shown to be less than ideal, with the affection coming very much from the adoring and, at times, too much smiling husband. Manimalika's gaze, her easy rejection of her husband's occasional attempt at an embrace and her face that would seem to calculate, rather than reflect emotion, all indicate that she is overwhelmed, not by the splendid new home in which she and Phanibhushan will spend their life together, but by its monetary value. The central passion

for jewellery is established by a simple move of Manimalika to a portrait on the wall. It is a picture of Phanibhushan's aunt, decked in a surfeit of jewels. This leads Manimalika to hint, none too subtly, that Phanibhushan should give her more jewels; he promises to do this, lamely making the condition that he would like her to love him a little in return. It is clear that as long as he is besotted by her, he will be a lame-duck husband.

The story offers a version of the eternal triangle. One day, when Phanibhushan is out, one Madhusudan, describing himself to the servant as Manimalika's cousin, unexpectedly calls on the lady of the house. His purpose is to press her into influencing her husband to give him a job, but the significance of the scene is the hint that there is something of a past between Manimalika and Madhusudan. It is this that makes credible Manimalika's ready agreement to help him—despite her apparent discomfort at seeing him—as well as her elopement with him after the devastating fire.

After Manimalika has run off with Madhusudan, adorned with all her jewels, the film makes a discernible turn from being a story about marital infidelity to one approaching the macabre. As he had promised, Phanibhushan returns from Calcutta with a new necklace for Manimalika, but finds the house empty. A very effective sequence of shots portrays his panic and its dissolution into depression. The ultimate moment in the deterioration of his spirits has him experience just for a moment the elation of what he thinks is Manimalika's return. The camera follows her hand reaching out to claim her new necklace when the shawl slips from her arm to reveal the hand of a skeleton. At the end of the film there is another ghostly revelation at the ghat, as Govindalal is confronted by his own first ghost and runs from it in terror.

For all its points of narrative interest and technical polish, *Monihara* remains little more than an experiment in an area in which Ray had not dabbled before nor would do again. There

are a number of weaknesses in the film that render it flat and lacking in inspiration. There is the clumsiness in the acting in the moment in which Manimalika locks away her jewels in front of Phanibhushan, warning him not to imagine that he might get his hands on them if his trip to Calcutta to arrange funds is unsuccessful. There is also the studied, stylised acting in the second of Madhusudan's scenes in which he considers Manimalika's request to take her away. But more telling is the lack of psychological intensity that might have made Manimalika and Madhusudan much more intriguing characters than the two-dimensional figures that they are. Manimalika's venality is clear enough, but the sharpness required to portray the passion of obsession is simply not there. Madhusudan's credibility is compromised by the interesting though, as it turns out, self-defeating ploy by Ray to minimise reference to his past with Manimalika. He comes across as something of a dupe with a suggestion of a potential for nastiness, nothing more, and whereas such a shortcoming might have enhanced the apparent perfidy of Manimalika, there is not even this compromise. The pathos of Phanibhushan, infatuated with a woman who has glamour but no warmth, and his despair in her loss, are more convincingly presented.

The structure of the film, navigated as it were by the schoolmaster and his story, gives some vibrancy to what might have been a turgid representation, given the thinness of the narrative, and the direction is taut and well controlled. Where Ray fails is in his inability to explore the psychotic aspects of greed, deceit and callousness.

In the third story, *Samapti* ('The Conclusion'), the mood is considerably lighter as Ray focuses on one of Tagore's most endearing characters, a seemingly incorrigible tomboy, Mrinmayi.[3]

[3] The role is one of the earliest played by Aparna Dasgupta who, in adult life as Aparna Sen, would be one of Bengal's pre-eminent actors and a director of considerable note.

While the irrepressible mischief-maker is a wonderful spring of vibrant entertainment, her story is imbued with some food for thought concerning the marriage of young girls. In much the same way as in *Postmaster,* the basis of the simple narrative is provided by the contrast between the two focal characters, but whereas *Postmaster* ends in a parting of the two, *Samapti* culminates in a union.

The opening shots of the film are establishing shots in the sense that they introduce the two central characters, providing also an initial indication of the contrast between them. The setting is a village beside a river. At this time, after the monsoon rains, it looks like a vast waterway, and along it comes a boat bringing home the newly graduated Amulya Krishna Roy, B.A. Watching intently among the trees on the upper bank is Mrinmayi. Amulya is formally dressed, wearing spectacles and reading a book; Mrinmayi is scantly dressed and is chewing somewhat inelegantly on a stick of sugar-cane. As the boat comes to the shore and Mrinmayi sees who is on it, she smiles enigmatically: is she happy that Amulya has returned, or does she anticipate the comic promise in his disembarkation? Indeed, Amulya leaps from the boat rather too confidently, for he slips on the bank and falls into the thick mud, drawing an instant response from Mrinmayi whose irreverent peal of laughter does more to infect the viewer with the fun of the occasion than its hackneyed cause. Once Amulya is helped to his feet, now an inelegant figure, he looks towards the source of the laughter, and Mrinmayi hastily and, in her own manner of inelegance, makes her retreat. Thus the two central characters and the contrast between them are introduced—clearly, economically, and entertainingly—and the underlying light-heartedness of the film has been set.

Amulya's widowed mother is naturally overjoyed to greet her son, yet even this touching scene of reunion bears an element of humour as the elderly lady embraces Amulya and, along with

him, the mud of the river bank clinging to his clothes. Of course, the mother is given ample opportunity to demonstrate her affection for her only son, establishing herself as something of an immediately recognisable type in this role. As well as feeding and cosseting Amulya in various ways, she is also solicitous for his future happiness and broaches with him the subject of his marriage.

Several connotative images are presented at this early stage. One is Amulya's cultivated sensibility, suggested by the reverential way in which he unpacks and arranges his books as well as by the prominence of the gramophone on which he plays records of Indian classical music. Interestingly he keeps a framed portrait of Napoleon on his shelf, suggesting maybe the conquest on which he will soon embark, but also providing another element of amusement at the hardly subtle contrast between the French megalomaniac and the young Bengali man of letters. Then there is the sound of the *koel* bird calling to its mate, a springtime sound readily associated with love. Amulya playfully answers the call with a whistle of his own, the significance of which will be realised a little later. The viewer's attention is then drawn to another sound outside the window, that of children at play. This image underlines the present immaturity of Mrinmayi, reminding us of the appropriateness of her society with other children, albeit boys, in a natural environment. Nevertheless, it is this childlike innocence and exuberance that come to endear her indelibly to Amulya and, indeed, to the audience.

However, before his major triumph our neo-Napoleon must attend to a preliminary action. His mother has arranged for him to respond to a marriage proposal from an established family of the neighbourhood and Amulya agrees to give it his serious attention. He prepares himself meticulously for this important meeting, dressing formally, even to the extent of wearing over his dhoti an *achkan* or long coat that comes down below the knees, diamond-pattern socks held up with suspenders, and

polished leather shoes – all quite absurd in such a climate, but essential to the impression warranted by the occasion. Part of the impression is the pocket watch, which the man of reason decides to reject on account of the fact that it does not work, but as he is about to leave, he changes his mind, opting for the value of appearance over function.

Reaching the place of his appointment requires a trek along an extremely muddy road, and very soon his attire is seen to be quite infelicitous. Ray's hint at the comic potential of the imminent encounter becomes more than obvious when Amulya skips a puddle with Chaplinesque effect. Ray is at pains to present him in evident contrast to his environment; a shot of Mrinmayi playing on the swing with the broad river behind her and her pet squirrel in one hand tellingly underlines that contrast.

The father of the would-be bride is a nervous giggler, and when his inanity continues just a little too long, it is clear that this otherwise auspicious occasion is likely to become something of a farce. With, on the one hand, the giggling father, the dotty and all but comatose grandfather, the audience of children and the child who would be a bride sitting obligatorily behind the harmonium, and, on the other hand, an apprehensive, over-dressed and foot-muddied Amulya, the conventionality of the occasion reaches the point of absurdity. Amulya, ill at ease, cannot eat the sweets given to him with the children staring at him, and when he does take a bite, it is fatal, for by then Mrinmayi has wrought her devilment. Her mere appearance at the window in medium- close shot is a clear indication that mischief is brewing, and when she sets the squirrel free inside the room, the gathering breaks into wonderful disorder. Amulya chokes on his sweet and coughs the crumbs onto the old grandfather's head, and Mrinmayi's bursting into the scene to look for the 'lost' pet brings the occasion into further disarray. Napoleon hastily retreats, thoroughly discomfited, as Mrinmayi, quite unknowingly, has saved her own future marriage. In this

exquisite sequence of three scenes, Ray has taken a conventionally serious occasion and turned it into an object of great fun.

The sequence really has four scenes, as structural balance is given by the return trek along the muddy road, and here a narrative turning-point is reached; hence, the demand for separate treatment of the scene. The camera follows Amulya along the treacherous road, noting his ultimate submission to his impatience with the impassable mud as he kicks off one shoe and flings the other into the jungle beside the road. The jungle, not unexpectedly, conceals Mrinmayi, who has secreted herself behind a tree presumably to watch Amulya in the hope of seeing yet another tumble into the mud. She takes great delight in gathering up the discarded shoes and even flings one back, prompting Amulya to go and look for the other. A simple device of theatrical farce is used to allow Amulya, as Mrinmayi looks in the wrong direction, to creep up behind her and snatch the other shoe from her hand. Nothing is said. Their eyes hold each other's gaze as Amulya holds Mrinmayi close, and then she breaks free and runs, not quite understanding the meaning of the unforeseen intensity. This time it is she, and not Amulya, who is the object of fun as she runs off, slipping and falling on the muddy road. More importantly, what Ray has been able to show through all this simple humour is the incipience of a relationship. Quite significant is the subsequent shot which sees Amulya resting on his bed, pointedly pensive, a shot which offers a serious side to an earlier, matching, shot of him looking happily through the window at Mrinmayi and the children at play.

Indeed, Mrinmayi is in her element playing on the swing, tending her squirrel, climbing trees and generally frolicking with other children, mostly boys younger than herself. Most of this play takes place on or near the river bank, and the shots of the broad river and the wide open sky provide a fitting context for Mrinmayi's sense of freedom. However, to Amulya's mother, his

announcement that he wishes to marry Mrinmayi is akin to the dropping of a bombshell. When she gets over her shock, she calls Mrinmayi to interview her on her housekeeping skills. The girl who is so much in her element outdoors, playing with other children, has little to boast of in household matters, and her nonchalant attitude hardly impresses her future mother-in-law.

Once the marriage would seem to be imminent, there is a cut to the picture of Napoleon followed by a shift of the camera to the right to show Amulya shaving. The grand campaign would seem to be afoot, and to substantiate this inkling there is a cut quite surprisingly showing Mrinmayi, indoors and making a concentrated effort at embroidery. But an effort is all that it is, for when she tires of this drudgery, Mrinmayi makes an escape bid; she fails, and is returned indoors.

There follows a remarkably economical sequence. Mrinmayi makes a great gesture of defiance by cutting off some of her hair and throwing it out of the window, although the futility of the gesture is indicated by the comedy in its landing on the decidedly grey hair of a man being barbered just outside. There is a cut to Mrinmayi being beaten for her naughtiness, then a quick cut to her sitting as ungraciously as she can beside her husband at their wedding; then comes another quick cut, this time to the bridal chamber. There is a significant irony in this sequence of brief cuts, which merge the naughty child with the wife, and chastisement with marriage.

The dialogue between the newlyweds when they are alone in the bridal chamber touches on an important aspect of the notion of equality. Amulya tries to find out why Mrinmayi is so headstrong, and there is from the outset a restrained though clear antagonism in her attitude to his endeavour to reason with her. She challenges him with the question, "Why did you marry me?" In reply he offers lamely, "Because I wanted to." Then comes her telling response, "I didn't have a choice, did I?" From his facial expression it would seem that this question has touched

the educated Amulya's sense of reason, and he struggles around it. She, on the other hand, is direct. "Why did you have to force me? I'm not a child." We may be impressed with his constant, gentle patience with her, but eventually he has to remind her of her changed condition. "You are now married," he insists, as though that puts paid to the argument. "*I* didn't marry anyone," she throws back at him. He falls asleep on the chair and she, once again, breaks out of her prison.

Mrinmayi's removal of her anklets might be seen as an unshackling of herself, but there is no mistaking the characteristically mischievous humour in her stowing them in the horn of Amulya's gramophone before she sneaks out into the open night and what she hopes will be liberation. The notion of freedom is enhanced by the camera and its representation of the clear and open moonlit sky, fields and river, all soothed by the gentle breeze. Her essential childishness is again highlighted by her visit to her squirrel, and then—on her swing, the broad river behind her and the soundtrack offering some music of joy—her freedom would seem to be complete. Of course, it is only an illusion, for again she is caught, returned, chastised and locked up.

The confining of Mrinmayi brings out two distinct sides to the girl. In order to force her jailer to relent, she starts to wreak havoc by throwing things around. The first thing she hurls at the locked door is, significantly, the bridegroom's headdress; a little later Amulya runs to the room to protect his treasured books. Mrinmayi tries to maintain an air of defiance, yet she is ashamed of what she has done, an feeling made clear by her ready compliance with Amulya's instruction to tidy up the disorder she has created. This might also be seen as an indication of her emerging maturity.

This scene balances in some ways the scene on the wedding night. The setting is the same, although the circumstances are radically different, although Amulya is again trying patiently to

reason with his seemingly incorrigible young wife. Now, however, somewhat weary from the effort, he would seem to have adopted an air of resignation, but the conclusion to the story is not necessarily foregone. He asserts his own fairness, pointing out that Haren the milkman, mentioned earlier by Mrinmayi as being a brute to his suffering wife, would have treated her quite differently. All of this seems to be water off a duck's back. Surprisingly, what has an obviously profound effect on Mrinmayi is Amulya's announcement that he is about to return to Calcutta, leaving her with her mother. Ray focuses on her reaction to this news, making a point of her hurt and her shock by slowly zooming in to a close-up of her face; this dissolves into a similarly composed shot of her, now lying down, and there are two or three more dissolves to indicate the passing of time with a morose and lethargic Mrinmayi confined to her bed.

It is an interesting reaction in that it shows the girl at sixes and sevens emotionally, caught in between the childhood she has just left and the womanhood for which she is not yet quite ready. Her withdrawal is not to sulk as a petulant child might, but to be with her thoughts. Ray presents a superb tripartite shot, again with remarkable economy, admitting the progression of time and evincing the generation of a new attitude. The shot is a simple close shot of her reclining head, not too close as to be unaware of any action going on around her but close enough for concentration to be on her. Then we are made aware of her thinking and her inner reasoning as the emetic flood of tears suggests her own intimation of the advent of her womanhood. The third part of the shot sees a change in lighting and a smile on her face. A leap into maturity is suggested by her stoic unconcern for her dead squirrel, and this new maturity is brought further into relief by the subsequent shot which shows a young boy on the swing, not Mrinmayi, when Amulya returns again from Calcutta. Mrinmayi is, in fact, busy with her letters, and there is now a look of earnest resolve on her face.

It is a different Amulya who now goes looking for a different Mrinmayi. He is a husband, grown in understanding beyond the offering of his books, looking for his wife, who has come to know herself in ways that were not so long ago utterly alien to her. There are two or three shots of her crying on her own under a tree in the rain; as she realises Amulya is out in the wet and becoming recklessly dirtied by the muddy road just to look for her, her sobbing turns to laughter and her eyes light up. A short time later she takes herself to him. There is a lovely point of view shot, blurred through Amulya's wet spectacles, so giving a brief sense of unreality, and then the image sharpens to let there be no doubt that his wife has come to him, she is careful to point out, of her own will.

Can we say that the shrew has been tamed? It is enough to say that the girl has grown up, and Ray has made his point, incidentally but cogently, about girls being wives.

In all of Satyajit Ray's work it is difficult to find a more charming piece than *Samapti.* Its light-heartedness is complemented by the light-handedness of its treatment which, together with the tight rein that Ray holds over the development, does not allow any of the characters to be taken any more seriously than enough. There are two or three scenes with dense dialogue, which are adequately balanced by sequences of short scenes and significant shot variation. Moreover, the film is marked by a strict economy in its visual realisation, where nothing is risked to the possibility of being overdone. A lesser director, for example, would have made much of the beauty of Mrinmayi, but for Ray her physical loveliness is always incidental to his story. The visual motifs, such as the picture of Napoleon and the swing by the river are given their value subtly, while the major features of the setting—residential interiors, the muddy road, the jungle and the river—are kept in exquisite balance, not only with the effect of providing visual variety but more importantly of representing the atmosphere of the village and its

relationship with the characters. In this sense—the village as a cultural unit—rural life plays a prominent role in quite a number of Satyajit Ray's films, and his understanding of its cultural depth and his artistic communion with it are fundamental to his superb characterisation of village India in such films as *Pather Panchali, Aparajita, Ashani Sanket* and *Sadgati* as well as being a major source of their brilliance. *Samapti* may certainly be included in this list.

The feature would surely have been more harmonious as a double rather than a triple bill, with *Monihara* kept aside for academic interest. There is a narrative harmony between *Postmaster* and *Samapti* in that the focus of both is on a young girl and her relationship with an older, Western-educated man, and both have a distinct rural setting. There is also a balance between the two in their differences: *Postmaster* resolves itself in parting while *Samapti* concludes with a union; the poignancy of *Postmaster* is countered by the general light-heartedness of *Samapti*; and the powerful simplicity of the one contrasts with a delightfully complex development in the other.

It is also worth mentioning that in Ray's six previous films the music was provided by musicians of considerable esteem, which is not quite the same as saying that they were luminaries in the world of film music. Ray had sufficient musical talent to combine with his obvious genius as a filmmaker to sometime or other compose his own music, and he did this with notable effect in *Tin Kanya*. From now on he would rely not on great names but on his own talent for the music in his films.

Arguably Ray's greatest film, and an exceptionally fine film by any standards, *Charulata* draws for its substance on the novella *Nashtanir* ("The Broken Nest"), which Tagore wrote in 1901. Charulata is the name of the central character; the subtitled version of the film carries the title, "The Lonely Wife".

The opening scenes are elegantly relaxed in tempo. Ray's intention here is to establish the atmosphere as a major character

in his film, and he sets about crafting his *mise-en-scène* with all the delicacy and meticulous care for fine detail of a Mughal miniature painter. The atmosphere that gradually emerges is rich in paradox: loneliness and emptiness amid comfort and elegance. The loneliness and emptiness are the lot of Charulata, the restless wife of Bhupati, the man who has provided her with a stately home and all its material refinements.

The opening titles are shown against the background of a pair of hands embroidering a handkerchief with the Roman letter *B*; we will see that the embroiderer is Charulata and that B stands for Bhupati. The opening line—a call for tea to the servant, Brojo—comes straight after the titles, and then there is a sequence of nearly eight minutes without any dialogue. The apparent uneventfulness of this sequence is instrumental in setting the film's pace—relaxed, some might say slow, but a tempo in which what will happen will happen in its own logical time. Nevertheless, the eight minutes are, indeed, replete with significance as the viewer is prepared for much that is to come. We become aware of Charulata's literacy as we watch her go to the book-case and take out a novel,[4] through which she browses until her attention is caught by sounds of life outside the house. The sound of a monkey-trainer's rattle draws her to the window, and through a pair of opera glasses she watches the man and his two monkeys retreating from her vicinity. A palanquin is seen passing the house, and then into her gaze comes a fat man bearing an umbrella over his shoulder; apparently she finds him amusing, and she moves from one window to the next, opening and closing the shutters as she traces what she can of his walk before he disappears from her view. Before the scene changes, she observes Bhupati's first appearance in the film, which has him in long shot coming along the extensive upper-floor veranda towards the camera, obviously rapt in thought, and passes into

[4] Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Kapalkundala.*

a room from which he emerges a few moments later with a book, opened and claiming his total attention. He is not at all aware of his wife standing just a few feet from him. While this long opening sequence highlights the restlessness of Charulata, it also underlines her isolation, the opera glasses signifying her only link with the outside world and providing a ready symbol for the fact that she is detached from life outside the house, able to watch it but never belonging to it. The shot in which she watches Bhupati through the glasses, followed by a close shot of herself and then a zoom to a long shot is more than eloquent in suggesting that there is also a distance between her and her husband. As we will soon come to see, Charulata's world is very much a microcosm and, hence, a distortion of reality.

As the opening lines of Tagore's novella tell us, Bhupati has sufficient money to have no need to work. And yet work he does, tirelessly and without respite. He is a grand idealist—a liberal, a disciple of the great philosopher of reform, Raja Rammohan Roy, and a champion of the new enlightenment emanating from India's association (marked, albeit, by its political dependence) with a powerful Western nation. He looks to England as the source and inspiration of all political advancement, his innocent enthusiasm as yet unclouded by any suspicion that lofty English political philosophy and its idealism were intended for Englishmen and not for their subject races. He is an ardent supporter of Gladstone and the Liberals, believing that for India the Conservative road would lead to injustice and economic hardship. His commitment to liberalism is the rationale for his commitment to his own newspaper, *The Sentinel,* of which he is the editor-in-chief. His enthusiasm for the paper is not exactly an obsession (although he describes it as his wife's 'rival') but it does occupy an excessive amount of his time. *The Sentinel,* of course, is in English, so limiting its appeal to the elite of Calcutta; Bhupati has no time and little respect for the Bengali writers so admired by his wife. He comes across as

dedicated, single-minded and sincere, a man of immense integrity, yet also more than a trifle naive, not only in regard to his imperialist masters.

The prominent effect of Ray's painstaking establishment of his setting and its essential atmosphere is the presentation of Charulata as being quite detached from Bhupati's work, hovering almost like a domestic pet on the periphery of his world. It would be simplistic to describe her as bored, although her life is indeed imbued with boredom. In the opening sequence of the film we see her, having put down her embroidery, looking aimlessly for some other diversion, while the company of her sister-in-law, Manda, would seem to bring not society but palpable tedium into her life. However, Charulata's malaise is much more complex than mere boredom. She is not only intelligent but unusual among women of her time in that she is educated. Ironically it is education that sets her off from Bhupati: his mind is excited by the political philosophers of Europe, while hers, with its strong literary bent, is quickened by the literary luminaries of Bengal; he reads and writes in English, whereas she finds expression in her mother tongue. Herein lies a significant element in her restlessness. Whereas Bhupati has his newspaper and his close circle of intellectual idealists through which to express his mind, Charulata has no outlet for her simmering creativity.

Just as it seems that Charulata is doomed to find her diversion lounging on the bed playing mindless card games with the illiterate Manda, a storm blows up and sweeps into the house the ebullient and attractive Amal, Bhupati's younger cousin. Amal, in his effervescent love of life, creates an impression of frivolousness, of being one of the idle rich for whom Bhupati expresses disdain. However, beneath the fun-loving exterior there is a highly intelligent, talented and responsible young man. We see snatches of this more serious Amal in the sincere respect which he shows so readily to Bhupati, in his work for him as

a proof-reader and in the pride he takes in his own writing and the application which he brings to it. We will not appreciate the real depth of his maturity and circumspection, however, until late in the film.

In the meantime Amal provides just the outlet Charulata would seem to need. He readily adapts to the role of the younger brother figure whom Charulata pampers by mending his torn shirts, making him *pan* and embroidering a pair of slippers for him. But much more than the younger brother she sees in him a partner with whom she may share a literary endeavour. The innocence of this relationship will, by its very nature, perhaps, turn sour, although two external factors are instrumental in forcing a reassessment of it and so shading with doubt its apparent naturalness. Charulata learns incidentally that it has been at the request of Bhupati that Amal has been encouraging her writing; hence she feels as though she has been patronised, a perception that would compromise the somewhat proprietary claim she would seem to be developing over her literary partner. The second factor—the acceptance for publication of Amal's essay after a spoken pact that they will write only for one another—seems even less offensive, yet it brings about the crucial turning-point in the film that will send the narrative in the direction of its disquieting ending.

At first there seems nothing untoward in Charulata's treatment of her younger guest. What might be seen as pampering a younger 'brother' might also be taken as the offering of simple hospitality according to the established Bengali tradition. In time, however, it comes to be seen as a simple ploy to make Amal feel dependent on her, to need her, to want her as she wants him, for in fact a noticeable element of intensity has come to colour her affection. The pair of slippers she embroiders for him becomes a sign of the special regard in which she holds him, a regard which might seem to demand in return some kind of commitment from Amal. When he eventually goes away,

the slippers that are left behind become a sign of his rejection of all that she has been trying to impose on him, so revealing the depth of her obvious devastation.

The literary partnership is more subtle. On the surface the endeavour is pursued quite innocently in the privacy of the garden. Two soul mates, undisturbed by the rest of the household, enjoy a special freedom of expression, a society symbolically enhanced by the shots of Charulata on the swing with the garden and the sky in the background. She proposes a pact: that whatever they write, they will write only for one another and not for publication. The proposal is important to Charulata and emanates from her growing sense of attachment to Amal; his agreement is amusedly offhand. And so together they write—at least, Amal writes, earnestly and copiously, while Charulata watches and encourages.

The sign that the atmosphere of innocence is not quite perfect comes when, from where she is sitting some feet away, Charulata picks a blemish in Amal's spelling, a mistake she is able to discern only with the aid of her earlier medium to the outside world, the opera glasses. There is no evident reason to have the glasses in the garden where the agenda is simply literature, a song or two and a play on the swing. At this point, then, the glasses appear as a sign of Charulata's assertion of a degree of suzerainty over their joint activity, and the exclusivity pact may be seen as a symbolic articulation of her possessiveness of that activity and, even, of her associate himself.

It is interesting, then, to note her seeming acquiescence in Bhupati's wish that Amal accept a marriage proposal. Whenever the matter is discussed, she seems composed, even accepting of what must be the inevitable in Amal's life. She reassures Bhupati by telling him to let Amal think about it for a few days, for surely then he will express his readiness to go ahead with the proposal. Maybe her self-assurance is based on a conviction that Amal will, in fact, reject the offer; indeed, the position that she

has created for Amal in her own life has become too vital to her to allow her to calmly acquiesce in Amal's marriage, especially given that the proposal also includes Amal's prospective father-in-law sending him to study abroad. However, Charulata assumes too soon that their relationship is more important to Amal than a proposal of marriage, even one containing the opportunity to travel to Europe. Indeed, more mistaken is her assumption that Amal understands the relationship as she understands it. Thus, when she embraces him and sobs on his chest after her assumed pique in showing him her own article in print, he realises that he has become involved in something dangerously profound. Here lies the categorical turning-point of the film; except for a wan smile with Charulata and an uncomfortable one with Bhupati, Amal will not smile or laugh again in the film, and his departure would seem to be inevitable.

It is tempting to lay at the feet of Bhupati all the blame for Charulata's discontent and the subsequent drama she brings into her life. Indeed, the initial impression he gives in the film is of a man absorbed in his work even to the point of being quite unaware of the presence of his wife, an impression that is not diluted in the rest of the film before the dramatic turning-point with Amal. But it would be too easy to say, even as Bhupati says jokingly to Umapada, that *The Sentinel* is Charulata's rival. While he may not be the ideal husband, he is certainly a good one, especially by nineteenth century standards: he has no vices, his sense of responsibility is steadfast, and he is able to keep his wife in material comfort and prosperity; he does not live apart from her nor does he stay away from her for long periods; significantly, we see that outside of working hours he is accessible to her. Thus it would be difficult to make a case against him as a husband. Maybe his one fault is that he is not as attractive to her as the younger, more available Amal, whose appeal lies not so much in his accessibility as in his youthfulness and ebullience. Charulata does surely suffer from boredom; the

mindless card game she plays with her sister-in-law, Manda, depicts her tedium as being veritably palpable. However, as an alternative to such frivolous passing of the time, would Bhupati's company be more stimulating to her than Amal's? Although Bhupati has no *need* to work, he does indeed have a *right* to work. It would not be fair to demand that he give up his newspaper and devote his time to Charulata. At the same time, Charulata's creativity does not depend on Bhupati. If she wanted to pursue a creative endeavour, as he does, she could easily do so. The fact that she writes only to spite Amal for breaking the terms of their special relationship has nothing to do with Bhupati's alleged lack of devotion to her.

Of course, Bhupati is, in fact, devoted to her and she is devoted to him. Occupying the entire title cards sequence is a close shot of Charulata's hands deftly embroidering Bhupati's initial in the corner of a handkerchief. The first line in the film is her chiding of Brojo for being late with the master's tea. This is wifely devotion, but wifeliness is not the same as romance. When romance beckons, she embroiders a pair of slippers—something of an extravagance alongside a mere handkerchief. The extravagance is a fruitless one, of course, for the real value of the gift is to serve to signify its rejection by the recipient: the shot of the slippers, prominent in the now empty room once occupied by Amal, is extremely eloquent in denoting his rejection not only of the gift but also of the giver. We may recall the singer presenting a song of Rammohan Roy on the night of Bhupati's celebration of the Liberals' election victory in England. There is a cut to a close shot of the perturbed look on Amal's face, over which is heard the singer, 'In truth and renunciation lies the way'. Charulata's passion has led Amal to renounce her.

For the most part *Charulata* proceeds very much on two levels. On the surface we have innocence and simplicity, but beneath the obvious we may appreciate a realm of simmering complexities where not everything is what it might seem to be.

Inherent in this latter realm are incomplete communication, misapprehension and misjudgement. Primarily we might note Charulata's inability to articulate her discontent to Bhupati. This is probably a ramification of social convention more than anything else, as to complain about her obviously comfortable life would make her seem an ungrateful wife. Bhupati simply assumes that her loneliness will be dispelled by her sister-in-law, Manda, a woman who is hardly Charulata's intellectual equal. He does sense that something is not quite right when he asks Amal to encourage her creativity, as he does not have the time to attend to the problem himself. Again, perhaps he is assuming that as long as Charulata has not mentioned it, it cannot be too serious. For so long Charulata does not make herself plain to Amal, and when she does it is with cataclysmic effect. Moreover, Bhupati is too quick to bless his fellow human beings to the point of being naive in his judgement of them, blundering monumentally in his misreading of the deceitful Umapada, and, while he is blithely detached from the daily world, his wife gradually falls in love with another man. Simplicity is both Bhupati's strength and weakness; his trust in human goodness is his virtue while at the same time it makes him vulnerable to deceit and misuse. Amal, like Bhupati, is an uncomplicated character, though without, of course, the naiveté of his cousin. Given that he quite readily assumes the role of entertainer to Charulata and, to a lesser extent, Manda, he and Bhupati both are what they seem to be. And as Bhupati is deceived by someone he does not know well, Amal is beguiled by one with whom he should quite rightly expect to enjoy an utterly artless and unequivocal relationship.

For this division between characters, especially the detachment between husband and wife, Ray provides a significant cultural context. His camera is meticulous in its detailed portrayal of the architecture and decor of Bhupati's home. Although we may observe the Bengali novels on the bookshelves, our view is

dominated by Western effects – the furniture, the paintings, the piano and, in the garden, the sculpture. In all of this we might fairly note a feature of the time in the apparent paradox in the juxtaposition of Indian and Western. Whatever suggestion of tension might stem from this might well be taken as a metaphor for the tension that evolves in the relationship between Charulata and Bhupati. On the surface there is, on the one hand, the Bengali-reading woman, and, on the other, her Anglophile husband. Amal, with his ability to embrace the literature of both India and Europe, might be seen as a bridge between the two. But Charulata's position might also be a metaphor for a colonial possession struggling for freedom from an imperial power, so making Amal's bridge quite inadequate to the task. As Bhupati finds inspiration in his reverence for English liberalism, Charulata craves liberation in her own Bengal.

Incidental to the central story is the minor theme of Umapada and Manda. We do not see very much of either of them, and their brief subplot is coincidental to the main narrative rather than an intricate part of it. Nevertheless, it has its significance. Charulata's brother, Umapada, has met with no professional success and has come to Bhupati for help. Bhupati does not seek to know the reasons for Umapada's professional failure, preferring to think the best of him and give him responsibility in the simple belief that he will respond to it. In a later conversation between Umapada and his wife, we learn that he is, in fact, a shifty ne'er-do-well, and that his expression of gratitude to Bhupati for his help and hospitality is to make off with the funds of which he has been put in charge. He is a quiet, unassuming character, clever in knowing when and how to strike. He offers a hint of self-assertiveness early in the piece when he expresses scepticism about the value of *The Sentinel*; Bhupati's response is to offer him more responsibility, including the paper's finances. Seemingly grateful, Umapada contrives to resume his humble reticence. His appalling deceitfulness to Bhupati

complements the even greater deceit committed by his sister. Manda does not censure her husband nor does she outwardly appear to abet him in his perfidiousness. She is a simple, uneducated village girl who has no choice in life but to follow her husband, for better or for worse. There is nothing much to her other than a willingness to please. She gives company to Charulata in the form of small talk, lolling about on the bed in the afternoon and playing fatuous card games. Her company is hardly appealing. Nevertheless, she is sincere, and tries to join in with Charulata and Amal until forced out of their society by her obvious literary inadequacy. She tries to please Amal by making him *pan*, but makes it too sharp for his taste. Soon she is seen as redundant in their company. However, when she and her husband are about to leave the house, Umapada is at his plausible best in making his excuses for leaving, while Manda sadly asks Amal to send her a copy of his article when it is published—"At least I'll be able to recognise your name on it." She is an easily pitiable character, both for her inadequacies and her vulnerability.

The minor theme also has the significance of complementing in several ways the drama of the major narrative. After the long opening sequence establishing the dryness of Charulata's life, relief is promised in Bhupati's announcement of the coming of Charulata's brother and his wife. As we see, poor Manda has nothing to offer Charulata and the promised relief fails to eventuate. In this atmosphere of tedium the effect of the storm bearing Amal is enhanced. Then, after the turning-point which takes away the smiles from the face of Amal, the tension cannot be sustained without some diversion. One source of diversion is the treachery of Umapada as he reveals it partly to his wife, where the deception complements the core of the tension which is being relieved. The other source diverts, at least for a start, by way of contrast in depicting the celebration enjoyed by Bhupati and his friends. Two elements of intricate irony emanate from

this: one is the cut during the Rammohan song to the thoughtful face of Amal, mentioned earlier; the other is the scene's ending with Bhupati being hoisted on high by his admiring and loyal friends. This latter shot—Bhupati up in the air—is cut to a shot of Bhupati's carriage running through the streets the next morning; very soon we learn that Bhupati is on his way to being brought down to earth, and with a considerable thud. This plummeting, in the form of the realisation of Umapada's appalling misconduct, is presented as a prelude to a small ray of hope—for the viewer as much as anyone—represented by a spell at the seaside with Charulata, but of course the hope is shattered by Charulata's unmistakable emotional reaction to Amal's simple letter on their return. The amiable, trusting and benevolent Bhupati is mercilessly made to confront reality, with the world, as he had believed it to be, falling down around him. The world that Charulata had imagined for herself has already collapsed with the departure of Amal, and he too has gone with his values and beliefs radically challenged.

One of the most 'Indian' features of *Charulata* is its pace. Probably of little interest to those whose preference lies in the action-packed movie, Ray's film proceeds organically, seemingly without contrived narrative stimulus, evolving rather than moving. Because its focus is so defined, interest in detail—visual, narrative, emotional—can be readily accommodated, and yet it must be stressed that Ray's perceptive attention to detail never descends to dilettantism, pedantry or self-indulgence, nor is his control over his subject compromised by any arty extravagance. The sparseness of dialogue might also seem to minimise narrative pace, although a thoughtful consideration of what is crammed before the camera will help us to realise how extraordinarily dense the film actually is. Ray directs every element of the making of his film with coordinate care to depict not only the concrete but also the abstract, such as the loneliness of Charulata and her longing for some kind of release, the

illusoriness of such things as freedom, beliefs and values, and the unfolding of the notion of betrayal and its effects.

Moreover, so much of the film's symbolism is offered unobtrusively, as part and parcel of the narrative, as it were, and yet the very careful placing of a symbol in the syntax of the film enhances its special quality and semiotic purpose. The embroidery, the opera glasses, the swing and the slippers do not obviously stand out, and yet each speaks beyond whatever material purpose it may have. Of interest is the way in which storms are used as parentheses for the entry and exit of Amal; it is easy to see his arrival as being borne on the freshness of the wind that also bears the regenerative rain and his exit being consonant with the gloom of the black clouds of the tempest, while some might care to see his entry to Bhupati's home in the same light as his exit. Interpretations apart, the parentheses defining Amal's presence in the film are an excellent example of Ray's superb sense of balance and poetic structure. The metaphorical ending, with the hands of Bhupati and Charulata frozen before reaching each other and the servant, Brojo, in the background bearing a light, allows the viewer a more personal involvement in the film than might have been possible had a more detailed conclusion been dictated by the director. There is a view that as the title of the novella on which *Charulata* is based, *Nashtanir*—'broken nest'—is superimposed over the final freeze shot, Ray is actually telling us that the marriage has collapsed. Many will find this view to be an over-simplification. The nest is, of course, broken, for trust has been betrayed. But whether this betrayal and its negative effect have to be categorical is another matter. Brojo's bearing of the light can be taken to be a positive indication of hope.

Charulata is a remarkably controlled film, a work beautifully poised not only structurally but intellectually and morally as well. The vibrancy of Ray's mind is reflected in the underlying ethic of the film that simple notions of blame and responsibility

can often be quite pointless. Thus, within a late nineteenth century, urban middle-class microcosm borrowed from Tagore, Ray presents us with an exquisitely crafted synoptic view of sensibilities that is as unsentimental as it is moving, and as impartial as it is intelligent and perceptive. Above all, *Charulata* is a film of brilliant visual eloquence.

Ghare Baire is Ray's Opus 26,[5] by which time it could be said that the best of his remarkable contribution to cinema had been achieved. This grandly dressed colour film of two and a quarter hours bears obvious contrasts to the more simply presented, black and white *Tin Kanya* and *Charulata*. It is an exceptionally heady film, a work of ideas and polemic like the novel on which it is based. Technically, it is a well made film, although the density of its dialogue and the intensity of its import must lessen its appeal to many. Moreover, the inconsistencies in character representation do much to compromise its credibility.

The film is set against the 1905 Partition of Bengal. The Viceroy, Lord Curzon, as a means of minimising the growing nationalist influence of the Calcutta intelligentsia and as part of a general policy of divide and rule over a multicultural population, had decided to partition the province, the subdivisions being determined largely along communal lines. The reaction against the move was known as the *Swadeshi* (or 'nationalist') movement and its hostility was expressed through a concerted programme of destruction of foreign goods.[6]

A simple paradigm of imperialism represents a colony as being both a source of cheap raw materials for the industry of the ruling country and a profitable market for its manufactured

[5] Not counting documentaries and shorts.

[6] One of the most famous works on the subject is Sumit Sarkar's *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-8* (New Delhi, 1973). There is a more accessible chapter on the movement in his *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Macmillan India, 1983).

goods; vital to that profitability is minimising competition from any local industry—hence the heavy tariffs on locally produced goods making imported products more affordable and dwarfing the development of any significant Indian industry. Fundamental to Ray's film is the simple economic argument between the opponents of imported commerce and those who would support it. The former, *swadeshi,* group expressed its hostility to foreign goods by the public burning of them, especially British made cloth. The burnings were, of course, costly in their wastefulness, but they were exceptionally powerful as a symbol of defiance against foreign rule. The *swadeshi* leaders also argued that their campaign of destruction of imported goods would in turn lead to the nurturing of local manufactures. The opponents of the bonfire campaign, while recognising the injustice of the partition and the exploitative nature of colonialist economics, argued that as they had no power to force the British to remove tariffs on Indian made goods, local products would always be more expensive and out of the reach of the more humble members of society. Those who could afford to buy the more expensive foreign products—not just cloth and manufactured goods but also such basics as salt, sugar and soap—might be enthusiastic about burning foreign imports, but as a result the plight of the poor would get only worse. To carry the movement under a rallying catch-cry was the slogan *Bande Mataram!*[7] Literally it means 'hail to the Mother'. Hindu nationalists would have had no trouble in equating the mother goddess with the motherland; Muslims might not have found the slogan so readily appealing. In the later part of the film, Ray does not gloss over the significant tension between Hindus and Muslims.

This is the issue on which two close friends, one a very wealthy zamindar and an opponent of the burning of goods, the other a fiery Hindu *swadeshi* leader, confront one another, with

[7] The title of a nationalist hymn written by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his novel, *Anandamath.*

the zamindar's wife being caught between the two. Herein lies the substance of the film.

Vital to the credibility of *Ghare Baire* are the characters. The representation of Nikhil the zamindar offers no problems. The role is well conceived—a man of warm humanity, cultured breeding and great strength of character—and is played with obvious credibility and polish by Victor Banerjee. Soumitra Chatterjee in the role of Sandip, however, has his problems, despite the technical brilliance he brings to the role. Perhaps Sandip is the kind of character who belongs exclusively between the pages of a novel, one who in cinema, where disbelief cannot be so easily suspended, is almost impossible to depict. Vital to the role of Sandip is its need for charisma to the point that the man's tremendous force of personality might conceal his fundamental moral flaws. He has extraordinary personal appeal which extends a ready influence over others, especially young men and, even more especially, Nikhil's wife, Bimala. In establishing his charisma, the task of the novelist is perhaps easier than that of the filmmaker; Tagore need only mention his spiritual power, the fire in his eyes, the magic of his voice, or whatever—Ray has to actually represent these qualities, and in this most vital aspect of the film his failure is unequivocal. Maybe this is because there is no clear development of the character; the Sandip we meet at the beginning, with his warts concealed, is perceptibly no different from the Sandip we see at the end with all his blemishes unmasked. The role of Bimala, at times beautifully portrayed by Swatilekha Chatterjee despite the obstacles, is less demanding, and yet there are problems here too as the viewer struggles to find some consistency in an endeavour to rationalise her character.

Ray is careful to establish Bimala's character and background before Sandip enters the film. She is intelligent, literate, takes readily to the study of English and music, reads the newspapers and maintains an awareness of current affairs. Indeed, she is a

fine match for the modern, well educated Nikhil. All of this is remarkable, given that she comes from a very traditional background, where for many years she had been obliged to observe the custom of purdah, or the seclusion of women. Nikhil wonders aloud that she can have a positive opinion of him when for ten years she had never even seen another man with whom to compare him. Her traditional background and her intelligent, modern outlook do not sit happily together when her relations with her husband and his friend come into focus.

If it is her alert and inquiring mind that is moved by Sandip's oratory and argument, there is no evidence of this in her conversations with Nikhil, whose reasons against Sandip's movement are simply and cogently expressed. If her surrender to him is emotional, one would think that her background had been such that allowing herself to feel even secretly attracted to Sandip would be out of the question. The two occasions on which she allows herself to be kissed by him—so clumsily!—beg credibility. If she is simply the traditional woman inexplicably over-powered by the magnetism of a man, we are given precious little evidence of that magnetism in the character of Sandip to lend plausibility to that view. If the traditional woman, secluded for the greater part of her young life, is simply caught between two strong forces of attraction and is unable to manage these within the accepted ethics of marital relations, then her intelligence and worth of character are compromised. Yet caught between them she is, and remains so for most of the film. Enigmatically—given the inconsistencies surrounding her—she is an attractive and appealing character, something that comes out clearly in her brief dealings with Amulya, one of the young disciples of Sandip.

Bimala is the central character; without her the confrontation between the two friends would probably amount to little more than an agreement to disagree. And so it is she who opens the film. The highly emotional opening shots and lines depict Bimala

speaking after the ending of the film. The first shots are of flames against a black background, on one plane a reference to the burning of foreign goods, on a more subtle one a reference to the conflagration experienced by the society in which all the agitation occurred; as well, the blaze is a reference to the flames of passion that have burned in Bimala's life, destroying everything that mattered to her, including her husband, and so, on a mundane level, his cremation is suggested here. Bimala goes on to tell her story from the beginning. There is a short, quasi-documentary sequence, with shots of the wedding of Bimala and Nikhil some ten years earlier and a formal photograph of them; her voice-over informs us of her conventional upbringing in confinement to the house, and of her husband's aristocratic lineage and his 'modernity', being the first of his family to pursue a higher education. The time-honoured and the modern are thus juxtaposed, for in many ways the film deals with the uncomfortable connection between the two. Once Nikhil is established as a man of nobility, discipline and learning, his sister-in-law is introduced into Bimala's narrative as one of the tragic examples of the many women who were married as children and widowed soon after, only to live the rest of their lives in austere confinement. The tension between Bimala and her sister-in-law, represented by a sad and sometimes pathetic contrast readily symbolising the tension between the progressive and the traditional—will persist throughout the film.

Nikhil's voice-over, reading an English love poem, brings to an end this brief, stylised sequence, and we see the couple together on a boat. Nikhil's sharing of the poem with Bimala suggests that their marriage is more an affair of the heart than a formally arranged contract, and that love can play a vital role in the relations between men and women—a notion not entirely in consonance with traditionalist thinking on marriage and familial matters. Nikhil then suggests that Bimala learn English, and promises to employ an English governess to teach her.

Bimala's amused reaction refers to the disapproval such enlightenment might evoke in her sister-in-law.

Nikhil's plan is put into effect, and one Miss Gilby is seen with Bimala, conducting a singing lesson. At the end of the song, when Nikhil appears, Miss Gilby reports very favourably on her new student's progress in music, conversation and writing. After Bimala's discomfort at her husband's presence in this situation has been made clear—the traditional in her own background still lingers—there is a cut with Bimala's voice-over once again, this time informing us that Miss Gilby's influence on her extended even to the clothes she wore. A little later we see Miss Gilby, her head and face bandaged because of a stone thrown at her by some passionate demonstrator, informing Nikhil of her need to leave in the face of obvious animosity. Thus, the personal aspect of the political and economic volatility is clearly and simply indicated by Ray.

Soon after that, Nikhil mentions that his friend Sandip has come to stay, and that he would like Bimala to come out of her confinement and meet him. He gives a succinct summary of Sandip's work 'for the country' as well as a strong commendation of his friend for whom he has a seemingly reverential affection, despite the fact that he cannot agree with Sandip's ideas about what it actually is that is supposed to be for the good of the country. Bimala, however, sees simple good sense in Sandip's ideas as Nikhil explains them, causing him to remind her of the plenitude of foreign goods in their sumptuous palace including, ironically, most of Bimala's clothes—saris made in Manchester.

Enough of the salient ideas of the film have been established in this opening section, and what happens in the rest of the film now has its essential foundation. We are aware of the significance of the tension between tradition and modernity, and Ray will go on to show how this tension plays destructively on individual human lives as surely as it wreaks revolutionary change in society. We are aware that love is germane to the marriage of Nikhil and

Bimala and that it is not a simple, arranged union, and Ray will go on to show how Bimala cannot confine the passions of her heart to one man alone; he will also show how the passions of Nikhil's heart cause him the pain of worry about his friend's influence on his wife. We are aware of the Western influence on learning and culture in Nikhil's own domain as well as the less attractive dominance of Western interests in the public domain, and Ray will later demonstrate how the innate destructiveness of colonialism gives rise to destructive forces within the society that is struggling against its imperialist yoke. And having been made aware of the brutal attack on an elderly lady, Ray will depict senseless violence eclipsing human reason and running its destructive course.

One of the film's shortcomings is that the working out of the triangular relationship is largely two-dimensional, especially in the treatment of the pivotal character, Sandip, and yet this emotional entanglement is the basic matter of the narrative, just as it is in the novel. While many might feel that the broader picture of the *swadeshi* movement in the local rural society is given considerably less treatment than it warrants, Ray chooses, perhaps in deference to his literary muse, to keep that aspect simply as context. However, after some considerable length the treatment of the triangle comes to be tedious while the context might have offered more interest. Nevertheless, this is the balance that Ray has determined for his film and there is no point in criticising him for what he does *not* do. Let us examine, then, what he does do and how his film develops as a result.

The basic factor in the three-sided tension is Bimala's falling under the influence of Sandip and the way in which this complication is resolved to the satisfaction of no one. It all stems from Nikhil's perhaps vain though understandable desire to show off his wife to his friends. He argues that the custom of confining women to the inner apartments of the house—obviously an upper-class custom—is not a part of Hindu

tradition, but emanates from the Muslim influence. He narrows his friends down to one—Sandip—whom he describes as worth a hundred others. Bimala, however, is not impressed with the arguments about the origins of purdah; how it originated has no bearing on the fact that she is quite content with it. Moreover, she blunts the keenness of Nikhil's commendation of his friend, declaring quite candidly, "He uses you", in reference to the fact that Nikhil provides Sandip with funds for a movement which, as we have seen, he does not support. Nikhil's singing of Sandip's praises is intended, on the immediate level, to warm Bimala to the proposal of meeting him, but it is also intended to prepare the viewer to accept as charismatic this man whose charisma is never really apparent.

Sandip appears first in his role as demagogue. The substance of what he has to say is important in providing the indispensable political context of the film, but his delivery hardly matches the admiration for his oratory that Bimala later professes. It is a conventional, made-to-order piece of speech-making, the most spectacular thing about it being the reception from the saffron-clad minions who make up the bulk of his audience. Here is the first major blemish of the film—what we get is somewhat less than what we fairly might have expected. Nevertheless, Bimala is taken by him. Later, in their bedroom, questioned by Nikhil, she tries to appear uninterested, conceding that his cohorts were indeed impressive, but a carefully followed move to his photo with an inquiry about the length of his stay suggests that Bimala's mind is astir. Her question, "What will I wear?" spells out her incipient submission to Sandip's charm.

There then comes the next major blemish, another anticlimax. There is a superb little sequence marking Bimala's coming out of the inner apartments, presented appropriately stylistically. The husband and wife move together along the marble corridor with its cut and coloured glass canopy, walking in measured pace towards the camera. It is a major moment, the moment of

Bimala's entry into the world, the time from which, as Nikhil a little later declares, she will be completely independent. Then the grandeur falls flat when they come into the elegant salon to meet the reason for this momentous break with tradition; Sandip looks anything but imposing or prepossessing, and his intended look of mild surprise on seeing Bimala for the first time has even a touch of inanity about it. His expression of admiration for her and of his wonder that Nikhil has brought her out into the world, so to speak, is clearly formal and courteous, nothing more. It is also noteworthy that Bimala, who has seen no man but her husband for ten long years, appears relaxed, confident and charming. Her expression of support for his philosophy provides the initial connection, which he seizes on, seeming to want to initiate the first woman into the movement. We will come to see that Sandip is being strategic, preparing the ground for however he might be able to make use of Bimala.

Sandip's intensity as a nationalist leader is compromised by certain weaknesses and inconsistencies, the first of which appears in this scene: his unshakable preference for foreign made cigarettes. When the tea is served, there is a joke about the sugar: Sandip will take one spoonful if it is imported, two if it is local. The joke is more than a passing moment of light-heartedness; it is also an indication of what will be seen to be the diluted commitment Sandip has to his ideals. He is amused at Bimala's challenging question about having the willpower to give up smoking altogether, not just foreign cigarettes. We will come to see that Sandip is stubborn and obdurate in the matter of getting his own way, but willpower is something a little different. Nevertheless, he makes a pact with Bimala: he will give up smoking if she will join his movement. The scene closes with a telling close shot of his cigarette butt in the ashtray, symbolically still smouldering. Bimala is left alone, a close-up of her thoughtful face suggesting a harmony with the cries of "Bande Mataram!" coming from outside.

Later that night Bimala plays coy, trying quite unsuccessfully to evoke an indifference to Sandip. She attempts to shift the focus from him onto Nikhil by stressing the contrast between the two men. Nikhil explains that, from their college days, both of them abhorred all kinds of social prejudice, although Sandip went considerably further to the extent of breaking off relations with his own father over the issue of his marriage. Nikhil remarks that the less one knows Sandip, the more one likes him. When it is too late, Bimala will acknowledge the perceptiveness of this judgement.

Through a servant Bimala gets her first call to Sandip. She goes to him, eyed significantly by her sister-in-law. As she enters the sitting room where Sandip is waiting for her, a clock chimes the musical motif of London's Big Ben, an oblique reminder of what lies at the root of all the turmoil in which not only Bimala and Sandip find themselves, but millions of others too. Sandip insists on Bimala sitting on a sofa beside him, and after what might seem to be an obligatory awkward silence, he embarks on his seduction. He starts with flattery, enunciating all her achievements and talents as Nikhil has reported them to him, coming to the point of it all: he wants this house to be the centre of his movement, and he wants to work with her, whom he describes somewhat inanely as his Queen Bee. The simple fact is that he perceives Nikhil, quite correctly, to be an obstacle to his work, while recognising, correctly again, that he himself is unbending and quite unable to compromise. In other words, he wants to use Bimala to get his way with Nikhil, to form an alliance with her in resistance to her husband. It is all mollified with ingratiation ("The more I see you, the more I like you"), culminating in a visual symbol of his claim over her in the form of a pin that had come loose from her hair the day before.

The seduction has deepened. At dinner that night, Bimala reports to Nikhil, Sandip's wish to work from there, a wish that Nikhil declares to be a mistake. Once again he clearly, gently

and patiently puts his side of the controversy. Bimala cannot dispute his case, yet remains nevertheless strongly drawn to Sandip's views. Later, on the balcony in the half dark, we see evidence of Bimala becoming distressed, perhaps wrestling with her conscience. Nikhil asks her about her future visitations to Sandip, and while she is coy and evasive at first, she then tries shifting responsibility along with offering quite unintended suggestions of blame back at Nikhil, declaring in an impatience born of her moral discomfort that it was he who made her go out in the first place, and "He is your friend, after all". Nikhil firmly stands by his belief in his wife's right to independence, but is clearly worried by where it is likely to lead.

Sandip sends Bimala a note which would suggest that the aura of romance has dissipated. He puts it bluntly, addressing Bimala in nationalist terms and appealing to her sense of loyalty: "For the sake of the country I need money urgently." The servant comes back with the news that Bimala is not feeling well, and we may assume that she is taking a step back to more clearly survey the situation in which she is now placed.

However, whatever flicker of doubt Bimala may have of Sandip at this stage, his faults are enumerated large and clear by the schoolmaster who comes to visit Nikhil. In some remarkably straight talking the schoolmaster directly accuses Sandip of being at the root of all the trouble in their part of the world. Students are dropping out of school, attracted to his movement along with idle louts and layabouts; the best among them, Amulya, will miss out on the scholarship for which he was a certainty; and an appalling act of incivility was perpetrated on Miss Gilby. The schoolmaster grants that the movement has good intentions, but adds that it has evolved into a destructive force, in contrast to Nikhil's earlier constructive work in trying to foster local industry. "Leaders like you act in self-interest. You don't act in the interests of the people. They applaud and you get all the acclaim." After the schoolmaster leaves, Sandip's reaction is

characteristically self-centred: "I came here to make speeches, not to listen to them." When Nikhil expresses his concern for the welfare of the poor Muslim traders in the district, Sandip again asserts his uncompromising stance: "If they obstruct me, I will not accept that." The schoolmaster is right; Sandip does not act in the interests of the people, but rather in what he determines their interests ought to be.

Sandip continues to follow his line of persuasion, taking his rhetoric along with his minions to the market-place. In an exceptionally well-filmed segment, where for a very welcome change we are offered something outside of Nikhil's palace, Sandip's oratory is an uncharacteristic flop. The traders refuse to offer anything to the sacrificial bonfires and flatly declare their antipathy to Sandip and his campaign. They will obey only one man—Nikhil. Clearly, Nikhil cannot be moved, even though Sandip has Bimala's assistance in the endeavour. Now we see the pragmatist override the idealist in Sandip, as his preoccupation with ends entirely subjugates any interest he may have in means. Bullying tactics, such as the intimidation of small traders and the seizing of their goods, come into play, while more serious offences such as the burning of silos and the sinking of small cargo boats are committed under the slogan of *Bande Mataram!* In all of this Sandip has the support of none other than Nikhil's own manager, playing a fifth column role. As all this turmoil is planned, we see Amulya, the would-be scholarship boy, watching in increasing disapproval as the idealism that won him over to the movement is being showered with contempt. (Sandip's peremptory dismissal of Amulya from a meeting with Bimala a little later would indicate that he has been exploiting the boy for his own ends, just as he is using Bimala.)

In Sandip's meetings with Bimala, fast becoming a very turgid aspect of the film, his flattery of her as a seduction technique continues. He now tells her that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her and that he needs her as much as he needs the

movement. She expresses her respect for Nikhil's views and shares his concern for the poor, a sentiment that elicits from Sandip no sympathy but rather the contemptuous observation that poverty is a symptom of weakness. Despite his protestations, Bimala feels somewhat supernumerary to Sandip and his work, and goaded by this sentiment she becomes agitated, even threatening to detach herself from him. And then comes exactly what Sandip has been angling for—her insistence on furnishing him with funds. In a later scene between the two of them, he once again uses sweet talk, this time spiced with the emotive hint that he will have to leave, so reducing her to tears and invoking just the right mood for him to impress her with his need for Rs.5,000. Of particular concern to Nikhil is the influence that this man is obviously extending over Bimala; now that influence brings Bimala to steal from her own husband—she will, of course, sell jewellery in order to repay him—and the impressionable Amulya to steal from the local treasury, inflicting in the process a gunshot wound on the guard. In a very well performed couple of minutes, when Bimala brings Sandip his money in gold *mohurs*, we grasp the innate venality of the man as he lovingly runs his fingers through the coins.

As Bimala has said, there is a remarkable contrast between Sandip and Nikhil. While Sandip is—or, at least, is meant to be—fiery and passionate, Nikhil is rational and unflappable, and shows remarkable poise. He is also exceptionally patient, never seeming to tire of elucidating plainly his reasons for not attaching himself to Sandip's movement. One thing he does have in common with Sandip is his obduracy. As long as he sees the weaker members of society under threat, he will entertain no thought of compromising his duty of protection of their interests. When a hot-headed deputation of *swadeshi* workers comes to intimidate him on his stance, he again patiently and quietly sets out his reasons for not supporting them, and when his national loyalty is challenged, he declares steadfast support for the little people of his own estate.

Nikhil is soon vindicated as the excesses of the campaign are revealed for what they are worth. We see Nikhil riding around the estate and we note an ominous emptiness. Soon we hear voices, and are then witness to a public meeting in the courtyard of a mosque where a speaker is heard to declare the movement an essentially Hindu movement. Nikhil, with exquisite courtesy, consults with a gathering of leaders of the Hindu community, urging peace, mutual understanding and tolerance. He makes it clear that there is no malice coming from the Muslims, but that particular interest groups are dividing the two communities. He also issues a warning against the antagonising of Muslims, the majority community in this part of Bengal.

When violence erupts spontaneously, it is bad enough, but when it is deliberately contrived in order to create an effect, its plotters bear a particularly abhorrent burden of guilt. The devious, manipulative strategies of Sandip are soon in the open, and we learn of preconceived fuelling of communal tension, adding riots and all their social destruction to the bullying tactics of which Sandip has already been seen to be guilty. At last, as he is fondly fingering the coins that Bimala has stolen for him, Nikhil delivers his ultimatum that he must leave at once: "The situation is bad and you are making it worse." Although he had his inklings and suspicions earlier, Nikhil now sees through Sandip as a sham, and a dangerous one at that. His duplicity is underlined a little later to Bimala by Amulya who reports of Sandip's love of luxury, his indulgence in foreign cigarettes and his always travelling first class.

And so the scales eventually fall from Bimala's eyes. She declares to him that she can no longer believe in the value of his work. "We are out of tune, Sandip," she says. Referring to Nikhil's earlier remark, "The less you know Sandip, the more you like him", she adds, "I came to know you too well." Having made clean the break with Sandip, Bimala must now expiate her guilt with Nikhil. In confessing her involvement with the money, she

elicits from him a response no more chastising than, "Now you know how hard it is to say no to Sandip". Nikhil is as magnanimous as ever, and this serves only to underline Bimala's sense of her own unworthiness. It is in this atmosphere of guilt and forgiveness that Nikhil rides off to try to quell the riots which, thanks to Sandip and his supporters, have now got out of hand. He will not return alive, and Bimala must live with her sister-in-law's accusation, "You killed him!" engraved on her conscience.

The ending is particularly sharp. There is a fractured sequence of shots of Bimala sitting at the window, from where she watched Nikhil ride away, inter-cut with brief shots of the portrait of the couple, and the garden path and the procession accompanying Nikhil's body. Still in the same position, a number of fractured shots visually transmogrify Bimala from a wife to a widow. It is an exceptionally tidy and economical ending to what is an exceptionally wordy and drawn out film.

It is often controversial for a filmmaker to make a film on a well-known literary work, for there will always be those who cannot see that representing literature as cinema is not like translating something from one language into another. There is considerable commonality between most languages; there is very little between two forms of art. While it is not unreasonable to express the personal view that 'the film is better than the book', or vice versa, it is often very difficult to substantiate claims that the author has been sold short or even betrayed by the filmmaker. Whether or not Satyajit Ray has faithfully represented Rabindranath Tagore should not be a criterion of criticism. The only question worth asking is, 'Does the film have worth as cinema?' In other words, the work should be judged by the criteria pertinent to its own art, not another.

Generally it must be said, however, that Ray does represent Tagore faithfully, not in providing a celluloid replica of his stories—something that cannot be done, anyhow—but by

infusing into his cinema the concerns, values and sympathies that pervade the original works. Whether or not Tagore would have liked Ray's films can never be known and it is, therefore, pointless to speculate on the matter, but it is fair to say that Ray's appreciation and interpretation of the original texts reflect a faithful and profoundly perceptive reading.

It might also be said that the films are as good as the texts allow, citing *Postmaster, Samapti* and *Charulata* as obvious examples. It has been argued that the shortcomings with *Monihara* are Ray's own, while the turgid polemic of the film of *Ghare Baire* reflects that very feature of the novel. Of course, it has been suggested that the film has other defects, but these are cinematic blemishes and not faults in representation of the original text. It might also be suggested that as the novel, *Ghare Baire*, is very popular in Bengal, where polemic would seem to gain more literary acceptance than in the West, the film might not be judged so harshly.

The prominence of women in the Tagore films must be noted. Women were focal to the social reform movement that coloured the history of nineteenth century Bengal in that the great names of the Bengal Renaissance saw eradication of evils perpetrated against women as being fundamental to a reformed and elevated society. Such issues as the abolition of *sati* (the self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres) and the legalisation of the marriage of widows dominated reformist thinking and agitation.[8] Reformers saw as basic to all advancement of women their right to education, and this is pertinent to an understanding of all the women in Ray's films (with the possible exception of Manimalika). The contrast in *Charulata* between the educated Charu and the illiterate Manda is complemented by a similar contrast between Bimala and Nikhil's sister-in-law in *Ghare Baire*,

[8] Mainly due to the endeavours of Rammohan Roy *sati* was declared illegal in 1829 and, due mainly to the endeavours of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act was passed in 1856.

while the aspirations to literacy of Ratan in *Postmaster* and Mrinmayi in *Samapti* are by no means of negligible interest. Tagore's concern for the extension to both boys and girls of the benefits of education was taken up by Ray not only in his Tagore films but also in *Devi, Abhijan, Kanchanjungha* and *Mahanagar,* with indirect reference in later films such as *Seemabaddha* and *Ganashatru.*

Tagore's fundamental humanism does indeed shine through Ray's films. Compassion for the weak and vulnerable is an evident value in *Postmaster,* while sympathy and understanding, leavened by humour and an element of levity, give warmth to *Samapti.* Blind justice, ever ready to assert the necessary connection between actions and moral consequences, destroys the wicked in *Monihara* while also delivering an unhappy judgement on the unwise. Compassion drives Ray's understanding of Charulata and Bhupati, yet there can be no alternative to Charulata's having to accept the consequences of her infatuation, while Bhupati also must come within the orbit of those consequences. While clear judgement is made on the opportunistic Sandip as well as on the exploited Bimala, the credit given to the just and virtuous Nikhil is tempered by the tragedy that is so often the result of the misdeeds of others. In all the films Ray portrays his people as Tagore created them, as individuals of particular interest along with their own personal values and shortcomings.

7 The Cry against Tradition: *Devi, Sadgati*

As a religion Hinduism is extraordinarily multifarious and complex. By comparison the Semitic religions appear simple and straightforward; notions of one God, one book and, in two of them, one prophet or one Messiah, set the religions of the Middle East apart from Hinduism and its 330,000,000 gods and goddesses, its vast libraries of scriptures and its myriads of avatars, saints and seers. For most of us it is difficult, if not impossible, to come to terms with such an immense and diverse ocean of religious thought and experience; it is not surprising, therefore, that Hinduism means different things to many different people, Hindu and non-Hindu alike, and so has become greatly disintegrated, at least in its external forms, by sectarianism. Hinduism, however, is more than a religion. It must be stressed that Hinduism is a way of life greatly imbued with religion, and that so much of the Hindu experience of life has been modified, if not directed, by scripture. Scripture, including preserved tradition, governs an amazing range of human activities from, for example, philosophy, art and architecture, music and literature

to sexual relations, dietary regulations and astrology. Over-riding all of this is the social system based on caste—genetically determined, hierarchically arranged, and occupationally defined. Appended to the caste system is a similarly arrayed outcaste system embracing people held to be in one way or another untouchable.

Satyajit Ray was not an orthodox Hindu but belonged to an adjunct of Hinduism known as the Brahmo Samaj, which may be translated literally as 'Society of God'. The Brahmo Samaj was founded in 1828 by the great Bengali social and religious reformer, Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), and was established as an influential force in the intellectual life of nineteenth century Calcutta by Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), father of the even more illustrious Rabindranath, who was, if the chain may be somewhat arbitrarily continued, mentor for a time to Satyajit Ray.[1] Rammohan's wish was to simplify and, indeed, purify Hinduism to make it more widely accessible by ridding it of irrational excrescences such as polytheism, idolatry and superstition, and the Brahmo Samaj took up this aim while developing a system of worship far removed from the extravagance of Hindu ritual and closer in form to the devotions of Protestant Christianity. Social thinking was very much focussed on women, Rammohan having been a leading light in the crusade against *sati* (the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres) and a champion in the cause of women's education. *Sati* was abolished, at least by decree, in 1829, and Brahmo luminaries such as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar devoted themselves to female education and the propagation of widow marriage. As the social philosophy of the Samaj became more liberal, there emerged many who saw that the injustice inherent in the inequality essential to the caste system could not be justified, least of all by reason.

[1] Ray studied art at Tagore's university at Shantiniketan for three years from 1940.

Satyajit Ray made two superb films in which he cast a stern critical eye at widespread abuses in Hinduism that had been established by the force of tradition and which survived even in contemporary practice. *Devi* ('The Goddess', 1960) is based on a short story by Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee and, set somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century, deals with the ill effects of religious excess, in particular the corrupt nexus of idolatry and superstition. *Sadgati* ('Deliverance', 1981), based on a short story by the great modern Hindi writer, Premchand, and set in what could well be contemporary north India is a deeply disturbing condemnation of the practice of untouchability.

The titles sequence of *Devi* is set against the background of the head of the Mother Goddess in her more peaceable form as Durga, although her terrible aspect, in the form of Kali, will also be prominent throughout the film. The familiar, conventionally represented icon occupies almost the entire screen, underlining the simple singularity of Ray's subject. It is the goddess, notionally and dramatically, who dominates the film and its philosophy and whose worship is the focus of Ray's disturbingly candid criticism.

The head of the idol as background to the titles is seen at the end of the sequence as central to the action of the opening scene. Indeed, as the camera draws back we see it as the head of a complete Durga image, surrounded by other images of mythological cohorts, the major element in a large Durga *puja*.[2] The camera is behind the crowd, focussed on the image of their adoration. It is very noisy, as is characteristic of Hindu festivals, with much beating of drums. Ray sets a diversity of moods ranging from solemn reverence to unrestrained joy, seen in the prayerful devotion of older people and the dancing of young

[2] The literal meaning of *puja* is 'worship'. Here the word denotes the worship of a specific deity as part of a festival. The Durga Puja, held annually over a number of days in mid-autumn, is the biggest religious festival in Bengal.

boys. The most important part of this sequence is an expertly devised establishing shot which shows in medium close-up Kalikinkar Roy and his elder son, Taraprasad, both rapt in worship; the camera moves from them to the Durga image, and then back to them as they prostrate themselves at its feet. Thus, so simply and efficiently, the link between Kalikinkar and the goddess Durga, absolutely fundamental to the film, has been set. The camera follows the two men as they lower themselves to the floor, so revealing the vast array of elements of ritual. The frenzy of the drums heightens as a fearsome looking functionary raises an axe to bring it down on some hapless beast of sacrifice. There is a cut to an outdoor scene with fireworks rupturing the dark and Taraprasad's beautiful little boy, Khoka, his eyes lit up like the sky, sitting on the shoulders of his uncle, Umaprasad, the younger son of Kalikinkar. With them is Umaprasad's demure and attractive young wife, Dayamayee. It is the last night of the festival, which throbs with frantic excitement as the images are taken from their places of worship and given over to the eternal by immersion in the river. It is a sequence marked by familial joy and community fervour.

There are several aspects of popular religion that Ray makes liable to criticism in these opening two sequences of the film. One may at least wonder at the expense involved in the creation and ornate decoration of idols, remembering that at the end of the festival they are consigned with all their splendour to the river. The shot revealing the elements of ritual worship may be thought of as anticipating a similar shot thirteen years later in *Ashani Sanket* in which the elements in Gangacharan's anti-cholera puja are displayed; Ray's distaste for ritual based largely on superstition is subtly reflected in both. The atmosphere of frenzy, particularly as generated by the beating of the drums, might be felt to be a sensual substitute for religious feelings that could be more rational and less abstruse, while the animal sacrifice is a blatant contradiction of the more noble Hindu sentiments

of non-violence and vegetarianism. The mass excitement accompanying the goddess and her cohorts to the river reaches its climax in nothing more ceremonious than the tipping of expensively dressed idols into the water.

Two very significant things have been established, however. One is visually atmospheric and determined by the lighting. Throughout the film the visual experience is one of glumness, so much of it being shot at night or inside the seemingly gloomy home of Kalikinkar Roy. The other is philosophical—the issue of the worship of an anthropomorphic deity—and is the basis of the film's drama, bringing into question the respectability of some aspects of popular Hinduism. Clearly Ray sees his subject in terms of its innate grimness and as coming from the darker side of Hindu tradition.

Fundamental to the narrative is the nature of the wealthy landlord, Kalikinkar Roy, played by Chhabi Biswas who, it will be remembered, created the role of the once wealthy and influential landlord, Biswambhar Roy, in *Jalsaghar* two years earlier. There are some superficial characteristics common to the two roles, to which Biswas was eminently suited, but the astute, intelligent and highly cultivated Biswambhar has no essential counterpart in the fatuous and gullible Kalikinkar. However, while his portrayal of Biswambhar dominates *Jalsaghar* with its power of personality, his Kalikinkar more subtly gives spine to *Devi.* Of course, Kalikinkar does not dominate the screen to anything like the extent to which Biswambhar does. His most telling moments are in the early part of the film, where he unwittingly sets his family on a course of destruction. Basic to this is his intense—some might say excessive—devotion to god as mother, and the depth of his affection for—some might say infatuation with—his younger daughter-in-law. The essence of Kalikinkar's tragedy is his conflation of these two objects of adoration; at first the confusion is expressed in merely figurative terms, but then it is articulated in actuality.

(The problem is not Kalikinkar's alone. The word 'Ma' has an application much broader in Bengali than it has in English, for example. In English it means 'mother' and, except for a relative handful of superior nuns, it applies only to women who have children. In Bengali it means both 'mother' and 'the mother goddess'. Moreover, it may be used to address or refer to someone else's mother. The term *bouma*, literally meaning 'wife-mother', is used to address any younger married woman, whether she has children or not, the pre-modern assumption being that every woman is a mother, at least potentially. Thus, it is conventionally proper for him to call Dayamayee—even though she has no children—'bouma', shortened to 'ma', the term by which he addresses and refers to his deity. However, we may also note his increasing difficulty in distinguishing between daughter-in-law and deity, not because there is no differentiation in title but because in his particular subjectivity it is very easy for him to merge the two.)

There are two early scenes in which Dayamayee appears as object: one with her husband Umaprasad as subject and the other with Kalikinkar as subject. There is a remarkable contrast between the two, emanating out of the different attitudes of the two men. The first of these sees Umaprasad writing on envelopes his name and a Calcutta address while Dayamayee watches him from the bed. He is about to return to Calcutta for study and is keen that his young wife should write to him every day. Evidently Dayamayee has acquired something more than an elementary education in that she can write letters, but the fact that Umaprasad has to address the envelopes suggests that she does not know English. (A little later she wonders aloud at the usefulness of knowing English. There is a slight affinity here with Ray's 1964 heroine, Charulata, who is educated in her native Bengali but not in the English so revered by her husband.) Nevertheless, the fact that a woman was educated at all is an indication of the social reform, at least in the cultural sphere,

which was taking effect in nineteenth century Bengali society. Indicative of the times is Umaprasad's enthusiasm for the language of the foreign rulers and the opportunity for advancement that it offers. When Dayamayee correctly points out that his circumstances are such that he does not need a job, Umaprasad appeals to the example of the great Rammohan Roy who, while studying in England, did not need a job either, so suggesting that education is of value in its own right. But then another value becomes apparent when a comparison is drawn between Umaprasad and his brother, also well educated but ignorant of English. Umaprasad declares that there is a world of difference between his brother and himself. The dialogue clearly implies that Taraprasad—and Kalikinkar too, it may be assumed—is representative of the conservative Bengali, bound by the narrow confines of a fusty tradition, while Umaprasad is indicative of the emergent modern Bengali.[3] Dayamayee admits that modern concepts are beyond her understanding, and although she readily professes a willingness to travel abroad with her husband should ever that be necessary, straightaway she finds a reason to keep her at home—their little nephew Khoka would have trouble managing without her. (Later, when she effectually does leave Khoka, the irony of this plea will become apparent.) So whereas education has equipped this simple village girl with the ability to write letters, it has proven sadly insufficient in giving her the slightest inkling of an understanding of the world in which her husband moves and in which he sees his future. Her perturbation will have to be mitigated by something more familiar.

Also emerging from this tender scene is Dayamayee's gentle affability and her ready devotion as a wife and paternal aunt. Consistent with this is her devotion to her father-in-law. There is nothing exceptional in this; in attending to her father-in-law's

[3] It is of passing interest to note that Soumitra Chatterjee, who plays Umaprasad, would be cast as Amal, the ebullient breath of fresh air in *Charulata* (1964).

comfort she is merely fulfilling her duty as the wife of one of his sons. What is unusual is the intensity of Kalikinkar's esteem for his daughter-in-law, an appreciation that is clearly established in a scene showing Dayamayee massaging the old man's legs and feet before he goes to bed. Kalikinkar is seen here as a pampered old man, having a drink brought to him and his hookah prepared for him before Dayamayee gives him his massage, but for men of his class such indulgence is by no means uncommon. Apart from a little inter-cutting to show Khoka and his special affection for his aunt, the focus is on Kalikinkar and all the dialogue is his. Nevertheless, Dayamayee's silence bears a significant eloquence.

Kalikinkar makes two points in his over-fond prattle. He reminds his daughter-in-law of how low in spirits he had been some five years back when he had been unable to walk without a stick. Desperate for some relief he had decided to go on a pilgrimage, but the idea lost its urgency when Dayamayee came into his house as his second daughter-in-law, and from that time his life became brighter under the care of his mother goddess, as he fondly calls her. He then mentions the need for her to keep an eye on his son, whose life he describes as extraordinarily fast-paced. There is a strong implication here of the distinction between the modern outlook of Umaprasad and the conservative traditionalism of Kalikinkar, in which the old man would include his daughter-in-law. His gentle teasing of her in regard to receiving letters from Umaprasad is a pleasant enough piece of domestic familiarity, while his description of her as his mother goddess might be taken as affectionate hyperbole. Dayamayee's silence makes us wonder how she sees herself: as the much-loved object of her father-in-law's affection with some kind of power to instil vibrancy into his old age, or as the fully supporting wife of an English-educated man with a view of the world extending infinitely beyond the limits of Kalikinkar's philosophy. Having noted in the earlier scene with

Umaprasad Dayamayee's expression of something less than a positive attitude toward her husband's ambitions, it is easy to feel that she might be more comfortable within the known and established confines of the world described by her father-in-law.

Dayamayee goes off to read a story to Khoka who, with what later is realised to be chilling irony, requests a story about the demoness who devours the flesh of children. Kalikinkar retires to his bed. There then comes the ineradicable turning point of the film, a moment that appeals to the heart of fundamentalism.

Religious literalists are never easy to argue with. What compelling reason can counter the claim, "No one has the power to question the ways of the Almighty"? Blind faith so easily obscures reason and would make it immaterial. It is particularly worrying when the zealot claims to have been visited by God in a dream and delivered of a truth hitherto not discerned (how many saints and seers have made similar claims over the millennia!). Purely by virtue of his position a wealthy zamindar has immense influence over others; he is a veritable monarch in his own domain and even beyond. So when Kalikinkar proclaims that it has been revealed to him in a dream that Dayamayee, his younger daughter-in-law, is an incarnation of the goddess Kali herself, his words carry seismic effect.

There are a few shots that briefly but very effectively establish Dayamayee's religious devotion. Whereas piety and attention to ritual are part of her nature, no one is more alarmed at Kalikinkar's pronouncement than Dayamayee herself. There is a shot of Kalikinkar making obeisance to her in the customary manner of kneeling and touching 'the goddess's' feet. To Dayamayee, she is still his daughter-in-law, and for her father-in-law to touch her feet is extremely unnatural. A close-up of her toes recoiling under her feet makes clear her horror at this frighteningly unexpected reversal of roles. One might also assume that she is infinitely discomfited by the outrageousness, if not the blasphemy, of being so gratuitously endowed with divinity.

Moments later we see her sitting in the sanctuary in the place of the idol looking for all the world as though it is her rightful place—until, in a moment of exquisite simplicity, the camera moves closer to reveal a tear rolling down her right cheek. The tightness of the logic in this brief sequence of shots is a cogent indication of the power of tradition over a simple, half-educated rural girl. She may not be fully convinced of her ascribed divinity, but not even in her own mind would she contradict the word of her father-in-law.

Bringing the nature of Dayamayee into relief are two little boys and their dependence on her. Khoka is representative of something very special in most Bengali families, the first grandson. In the very early scene depicting the celebration of the final night of the Durga Puja Ray establishes the close relationship between the boy and his uncle and aunt. Umaprasad and Dayamayee are standing close together with an excited Khoka on Umaprasad's shoulders. A little later in the film we see him being taken to Dayamayee by the maidservant, distressed that he will not eat from her hand. Dayamayee takes him to her room and bribes him with a sweet before making him feel important in taking to the postman a letter addressed to Umaprasad. However, what is especially important here is the short sequence of several alternate medium-close shots of Khoka and Dayamayee, each looking at the other, which clearly portray the depth of their love for one another. The basis of Dayamayee's earlier discomfort at the notion of leaving Khoka is here given simple and unmistakable substantiation. Their closeness is underlined finally when Khoka is shown taking himself and his pillow into his aunt's room to spend the night with her. Significantly, this is the night on which Kalikinkar has his crucial dream. Then, once Dayamayee has been ensconced in the sanctuary as Mother Kali herself, what had been the awful possibility of becoming estranged from Khoka now materialises.

The other little boy presents a remarkable contrast to Khoka. He is the grandson of a beggar seen singing a devotional song to Kali on the steps outside Kalikinkar's sanctuary. This little boy does not run about and play but remains always in his grandfather's arms, still and listless, his sad eyes seemingly seeing nothing. While Khoka and Kalikinkar are portrayed as typical of a privileged class, the other little boy and his grandfather are depicted as representative of the vast anonymous mass of deprived and illiterate people, for whom life is a constant struggle, yet who devote themselves to deities such as Kali with no less strength of faith than does Kalikinkar. The beggar's song lauds the goddess for being so much more even than a mother, for giving him life and more—just as Kalikinkar had recently lauded Dayamayee—but as we look at this beggar who has nothing, we must wonder why he should be so grateful. It is sobering to remember how strong is the power of idolatry and superstition over the poor and uneducated. Ray pointedly shows that the man's plaintive cry for alms from the opulent falls on the deaf ears of Kalikinkar and Dayamayee, both too busy propitiating a statue to be moved by the cries of the hungry. Once Dayamayee has been ensconced by Kalikinkar as the goddess incarnate, however, the beggar's grandson comes into acutely dramatic contact with the zamindar's daughter-in-law.

In *Devi* so much happens while very little seems to be happening. The intensity of the narrative and the director's tight control over it are marked in this film even more than in any of Ray's previous works, with the exception, perhaps, of *Charulata*. Indeed, *Devi* is one of the leanest of Ray's films, a work in which events turn so quickly yet seemingly undramatically that their consequences are sometimes subtle to discern. There is an element of mystery in the progression of the narrative after Kalikinkar's dream, intensified by the virtually complete silence of the central character, Dayamayee as the 'Devi'.

Alert to the risk of this progression becoming tedious or of allowing familiarity to blunt its edge, Ray heightens its effect by taking us away from it for a brief episode to share something of Umaprasad's life in Calcutta. What emanates from this is a clear perception of the distance between the progressive world of the capital[4] and the unchanging way of life in the countryside. We see Umaprasad at the newly popular theatre enjoying a witty comedy in Bengali, while on his way home from the theatre there is a casual reference to one of the raging controversies of the day, the marriage of widows. And then, having returned to his digs, Umaprasad receives the letter that will take him home to the realisation that his life has changed utterly.

At the core of that change is the transformation of his wife. Initially, though, it is more a question of a transformation in perceptions of Dayamayee than a change in the girl herself. At first she is reluctant to accept Kalikinkar's new view of her but, unable to gainsay her father-in-law's pronouncements, she must somehow go along with it. Kalikinkar's word would seem to be final, for Ray wastes no time in showing her in the sanctuary as the object of worship. She appears stoical but for the tear already mentioned, yet as the ritual becomes more intense she becomes overwhelmed and faints. But what has overwhelmed her? Maybe it is the intensity of the atmosphere, but it is just as likely to be something else – fear, shame, even horror. Again, though, the focus is on Kalikinkar, not Dayamayee. He rushes to her and seeks to know the matter; getting no reply, he jumps to what is for him the desired explanation: the Mother has entered into *samadhi* or a state of spiritual ecstasy. Rather than alert the worshippers to what an innocent girl is being obliged to suffer, this incident and its 'explanation' only inspire them to more intense devotion, even more convinced as they are of her divinity. Ray offers one telling sign that all is not well, in a shot depicting

[4] Calcutta was the capital of British India until that status was given to Delhi in 1911.

the look of horror on the face of Harasundari, Dayamayee's sister-in-law. To add to her confusion, Dayamayee wakes up in a strange room, which is now to be hers in order to keep her close to the temple. Harasundari, not trying to conceal her distaste for what their father-in-law has done, explains why she has been moved and responds directly and positively to Dayamayee's simple cry for help—"Will you write to him?" But the confusion is maintained when Harasundari has left the room and the maid falls at the feet of 'the Goddess' begging for forgiveness of her sins. The camera reveals a disquieting look of confused helplessness on the face of Dayamayee as the scene ends.

Harasundari is probably no better educated than Dayamayee, but she is older, more mature and more experienced in life. With Umaprasad away she is the lone voice of reason and common sense in a house now governed by superstition. She rebukes her husband, Taraprasad, for the moral weakling he is in going along blindly with the absurd pronouncements of his father and then finding solace in drink. Her tone and choice of words make it quite clear to Dayamayee that she does not share in the new exalted opinion of her and that she is, indeed, cynical about those who do. However, she is only a woman and her opinions carry no worth, and so she hastens to write to her brother-in-law, but before Umaprasad can return, the beggar's grandson becomes an extraordinarily potent catalyst in the working out of the narrative.

That this working out impinges on Umaprasad is implied in the cut from him reading Harasundari's letter to a close shot of the beggar carrying his evidently sick grandson along a dusty road. The vast emptiness, save for a passing bullock dray, underlines his apparent helplessness. A cut to a close shot of Dayamayee as 'goddess' being worshipped by Kalikinkar and his priest suggests the beggar's intention. The next shot sees him approaching the sanctuary, imploring 'Ma' to save the sick little

boy. After the dream of Kalikinkar, this is the next crucial point in the film; it will ostensibly establish the genuineness of the 'incarnation' even more strongly than her alleged assumption of *samadhi*.

After the administration of holy water and milk at the feet of the 'goddess' the little boy recovers, offering substance to the old piece of wisdom to be careful about what you wish for in case you get it. Kalikinkar's wish that Dayamayee be established as an incarnation must now be beyond doubt—quite beside the fact that a rational explanation for the boy's recovery would be even easier to establish—but what also has been set in motion is a sequence of events that could have been anticipated not in Kalikinkar's dreams but in his worst nightmare. The 'proof' of the genuineness of the alleged deity will cost him his grandson as well as his daughter-in-law.

Ray's concern for tidiness of form and cogent syntax must be noted. The cut from Umaprasad reading the letter to the beggar bearing his grandson along the road implies that the involvement of Umaprasad in the matter of the little boy's illness will be significant. While the child is being 'treated' there is a cut to show Umaprasad coming from the boat along the road to his home. (A delightful touch of temporal context is offered as a palanquin passes him from the opposite direction, and we are reminded of Umaprasad's status when one of its retinue bows reverentially to him as he goes by.) Umaprasad's arrival at the house is noticed only by a servant, who comes and takes his luggage from him, and by his wife, the spectacle of whom brings darkness to his face. A subtle facial gesture from her, to which he responds with understanding, restrains him from reacting in any way just yet, presumably for the sake of the little boy. However, the 'miracle' at her feet would suggest that an irrevocable change has come over the marriage of Dayamayee and Umaprasad.

Rather than wait to take the matter up with his wife Umaprasad goes directly to his father. The confrontation that

ensues is exceptionally well presented, intellectually, visually and dramatically. Intellectually it reflects the contemporary conflict between reason and blind faith, often represented as the clash between burgeoning modernity and stagnant tradition. Umaprasad argues that his father's new perception of Dayamayee is sheer madness, made clear by its 'evidence' being revealed in a dream; Kalikinkar appeals to scripture and makes counter-assertions concerning the intensity of faith, which the audience might well interpret as offering substantiation of Umaprasad's claim of madness. However, there is no mutual engagement between the two, the gulf between claim and counter-claim being highlighted by the composition of the scene. For the most part Umaprasad remains still, while Kalikinkar moves agitatedly around the room. Visually Kalikinkar is central to the scene, but largely as though through the eyes of Umaprasad. Dramatically the scene is played on the counterpoints of youth and age, of reason and superstition, and while the old man is buoyed by his religious passion, the young man too is goaded by an emotion emanating out of both love and fear for his wife, the occasional close-ups of his face reflecting his profound concern for the formidable opposition represented by his father's adamantine convictions. Thus the essential human element precludes the direction of Umaprasad as the cool, calm voice of reason against the ranting histrionics of Kalikinkar[5]. The conclusion of the scene is particularly dramatic in that it resolves in favour of Kalikinkar, so ensuring the continuance of the narrative along now established lines. Moreover, the appeal to the 'miracle' just performed—the recovery of the beggar's grandson—makes appropriate deference to the established syntax of the film.

This scene is complemented by a much less confrontational sequence between Umaprasad and Dayamayee. Whereas

[5] It is interesting to note the sharp contrast between the nature of this confrontation and the didactic tone of those between Nikhilesh and Sandip in *Ghare Baire* (1984).

Umaprasad expressed scorn for his father's irrational respect for dreams, he is not contemptuous of his wife's going along with her father-in-law's superstitious obsession; rather, his mood manifests his love and acute anxiety for her. However, the obvious engagement between the two that characterised their bedroom scene early in the film is no longer evident. Whereas the physical distance that dictated the composition of the recent scene between father and son is contrasted here by the closeness of husband and wife, Dayamayee is remote from Umaprasad. (We might note that it is not *their* bedroom in which they now meet, but the new chamber set aside by Kalikinkar for the 'goddess'.) As there was an impenetrable barrier between Umaprasad and his father, a similar barrier now prevails between him and his wife. He challenges her to deny that she believes in her ascribed divinity, even to the point of putting words into her mouth and specifying the simple gesture of a shake of the head, but Dayamayee cannot bring herself to repudiate the faith of her father-in-law. Umaprasad readily understands her fear, yet his understanding only contributes to the emotional tension as we might well suspect that there is more than fear to explain her reticence.

It is more out of respect for her husband than anything else that Dayamayee agrees to run away with him to Calcutta. We watch the two stealthily hurry through the tall *kash* grass[6] to the river in order to take the boat to Calcutta. A simple visual provokes the dramatic turnaround. Dayamayee's eye catches a remnant of an image committed to the river after the recent Durga Puja and is immediately assailed by doubts about the propriety of deserting her place in the family temple. This is an extraordinarily effective piece of direction, allowing the visual to achieve instantly what dialogue could only labour to do. Umaprasad's rational persuasion can achieve nothing, and again the impossibility of his task is made clear by the camera.

[6] See Chapter 2, note 9.

Umaprasad is holding Dayamayee in a close embrace, and the shot is a close-up: Umaprasad is seen in profile, but central to the frame is the face of Dayamayee. Her face tells us clearly that she is distressed to the point of being unable to comply with a simple request from her husband. Even more significant is the fact that she cannot bring herself to look at him even for a moment as she is totally distracted by the image in the shallow water, underlining her expressions of doubt ("What if I am the goddess?") and fear ("What danger might befall you if I go to Calcutta?"). Of the two, fear is the abiding emotion, and she gives vent to her tears with her face against Umaprasad's chest. Here the composition suddenly changes, with the helpless wife seen from behind and the tall, protective husband central to the frame. It is an image underlining conventionality and offering hope that, although they will not elope to Calcutta, balance has been restored to the marriage with the husband once again exercising a protective role over his wife. This brilliant piece of direction goes even further than offering this hope—it sows a seed of doubt in the sureness of that hope. Dayamayee still has not looked lovingly and trustingly into Umaprasad's eyes, and their slow walk back through the shadows of the *kash* grass does not convince us that all is once again well. Perhaps there is a hope that it might be—provided nothing untoward happens.

However, in the very next scene we see that Dayamayee's fame has spread far and wide. The beggar and his grandson, now recovered from his illness, introduce the scene with the old man singing his devotional song, and this would suggest that it has been the 'miracle' wrought on the little boy that has brought the endless stream of people across the vast plains and dried up riverbeds to enrich their humble lives with a momentary witness of the 'goddess'. One may worry that the healing powers of the goddess incarnate have been popularly established.

The ground has now been laid for the film's ultimate point of devastation. It soon becomes clear that the flicker of hope

that may have been discerned at the end of the scene by the river is now becoming dimmer. The point is made heartrendingly clear in a scene that shows Dayamayee resting in her room when the ball Khoka is playing with rolls in. He appears sheepishly in the doorway; the little boy who had earlier come eagerly into her room and settled himself in her bed now waits apprehensively for her to invite him in. A smile lights up what had been her sombre face and she gestures for him to come in. Looking apprehensive, even afraid, he quickly retrieves his ball and hurries out. The relationship has changed utterly: the child and his aunt have lost one another. The smile falls from Dayamayee's face. In her distraction she recalls two brief reminiscences. One is on her wedding night when Umaprasad, referring to her bashful taciturnity, playfully asks if she is an idol made of clay. The irony is sharp, even if a little too obvious. The second is a cameo incident of the happy triviality of early married life when Umaprasad gets himself caught up in his unbuttoned shirt and calls on her for rescue. The warmth of that simple worldly joy contrasts cruelly with the state of being a goddess without a husband or a Khoka. Again the tears start to flow, and again we might hope that the essentially human in Dayamayee will prevail over her assumed divinity. We then see Dayamayee leave her chamber and go to the room she once shared with Umaprasad. On the way she comes across Khoka riding on the back of a servant, evidently his new playmate. As soon as the child sees Dayamayee, he runs in fear to his mother and the servant stands respectfully aside. The sad point is made more to the audience than to Dayamayee, who proceeds seemingly unfazed. The optimism that may have emanated from her earlier tears is strengthened a little as she unlocks a drawer and takes out fondly a bunch of letters, presumably those sent to her from Calcutta by Umaprasad. She leaves the room, affectionately strokes the parrot that had been an element of joy early in the film, and walks away, watched in silence by Harasundari and the servant.

These two consecutive scenes are examples of several in *Devi* that highlight Ray's cinematic genius. As in the scene with Kalikinkar and in the extraordinarily moving scene on the river bank, the camera once again reveals the full emotional depth that is being developed through action and dialogue. But in these two scenes—with the exceptions of the two little flashbacks and Khoka's calling to his mother—there is no dialogue at all. It is pure cinema, with the meaning emerging so cogently out of composition and superbly enacted facial expression.

The slight ray of hope of Dayamayee's possible return to familial life soon becomes remote with the worsening illness of Khoka. The little boy suddenly becomes racked with fever. Harasundari calls in a doctor—or the nineteenth century rustic equivalent of one—but the matter cannot be so simple. Even the doctor, who might be expected to offer genuine support to the rational Harasundari, has grave doubts about the propriety of his examining Khoka when the child might be taken straight to the Mother Goddess herself. What rationality there is must stand compromised under the strength of superstition wielded by men greater than the doctor—Kalikinkar, even Taraprasad, whose mere presence sends the doctor packing. (The doctor's moral frailty is highlighted by the contrast provided by Umaprasad's teacher who challenges him to bravely and willingly accept the aspersions that would come from trying to brush away the cobwebs of tradition.) With the doctor out of the way Taraprasad insists that his father be informed and the goddess be entreated. Despite Harasundari's protests—she cannot believe that her sister-in-law has the power of divine healing—the little boy is taken beyond the influence of medical practicè. While Kalikinkar and Taraprasad appeal to Dayamayee in blind faith, Harasundari commends her son to her sister-in-law out of familial love, pointing out that the little boy has been deliriously calling for his aunt.

Dayamayee is in an extraordinarily invidious situation. How would Kalikinkar interpret a refusal to attend to the boy? What

if he should die in her care? Dayamayee is beset by fear from several sources and must still be confused under the uncertainty of whether she is what her father-in-law—along with countless others, now—says she is. Thus, the logic of the film demands that Dayamayee's mental state be fully appreciated at this point. It is made visually clear that Dayamayee takes the child out of so much love that has lingered through her distressing crisis.

There is then an extraordinarily powerful cut to a shot of the vast river, then to Umaprasad on a boat nearing home. The smoke coming from a fire on the bank is enough to suggest a cremation and the not unexpected fact of Khoka's death. All that remains is for Umaprasad to see for himself that the wife whom he has loved so much has lost her mind.

The grieving mother understandably but unfairly accuses Dayamayee of being a child-consuming demoness—an ironic allusion to Khoka's choice of a story early in the film—and Umaprasad charges his father with the guilt of the boy's death in having opted for superstition over medicine. Of course, this needs to be said—despite the fact that the film has well and truly established the case against one example of the darkness of tradition—because the film should not end with the imprecation of Harasundari being levelled at Dayamayee. The tragedy has not been one of her making. It is just and reasonable that Kalikinkar should be charged with responsibility for the descent into spiritual corruption that took Khoka's life and Dayamayee's sanity. What deepens the sadness of this tragedy, however, is the fact that Kalikinkar is no villain. He has always offered sincere worship to the Mother Goddess, he genuinely loved his daughter-in-law and he sincerely believed in the dream that so devastatingly transformed his perception of her. The real villain of the film is something far, far bigger and more abstract than all the Kalikinkars of Bengal.

Devi certainly must rank among Ray's finest films. Underlining its narrative progression is a strong element of tension that

occasionally turns to suspense. The story of a well-meaning, somewhat simple man's narrow view of the world and its destruction of his own family is told without digression or complexity; the narrative elements are simple and the development is logical and direct. The film's philosophy is just as straightforward, with no hidden meanings or mysteries. The simple story allows wrong to prevail, and in this sense it offers a warning of what wrong can do if let loose by ignorance. The moral issues of the film are as unequivocal as its black and white presentation and with very few of its shades of grey. Ray's condemnation of superstition is as candid as Umaprasad's unrestrained condemnation of his father at the conclusion of the film. Although a handful of ardent apologists of idolatrous mother-worship might be put out by the film's attack on the heart of their religiosity, the majority of viewers would surely see a telling reminder of the need to temper faith with reason, particularly in a country where religious excesses still make headlines.[7] It is important to point out that at no stage in the film does Ray even begin to labour his point. Kalikinkar's side of the controversy is presented without any suggestion of caricature, while the voice of reason emanates from within the limitations of Umaprasad's ongoing education. Credibility is perhaps enhanced by the fact that the 'right' side does not 'win', yet this only serves to strengthen Ray's message of caution.

Artistically *Devi* is a work of exceptional virtuosity. Mention has been made of the control over the film's narrative progression and its emotional content, as well as the economy of its structure and exposition. The atmosphere is carefully contrived to maintain a pervasive starkness, sustained wonderfully by the lighting that complements so effectively the many medium and close shots that serve to concentrate on the essentially human in all of the characters. It is also of interest to note that the only shots in

[7] We might remind ourselves of the Roop Kanwar sati in 1987 and the stone Ganesha idols claimed to have drunk milk in Calcutta in 1989.

which daylight is dominant are those which focus not on the players in the central drama but those peripheral to it—the beggar and his grandson and the hordes of common people. The atmosphere is well complemented by the music of Ali Akbar Khan, always beautiful in itself and never a distraction from that which it aims to enhance.

It is also an intensely visual film. So much of it is beautiful to look at, especially the interior shots, which in many ways anticipate *Charulata,* as well as the magnificent vista of the river, evocative of so much subjective power. But more significant is the trust Ray places in the camera to reveal so much of the story and its import, and in this film as much as in his best films there is a masterly harmony between camera and actors, bespeaking the hand of a remarkable director. The acting throughout is of excellent quality, especially in those scenes where dialogue is minimal or even absent. The two women, Sharmila Tagore who plays Dayamayee and, to a lesser extent given the limitations of the role, Karuna Banerjee, are particularly eloquent with their facial responses. When Umaprasad confronts his wife after the death of Khoka, it is her physical distraction—dressed like a bride in all her splendour, with her hair slightly dishevelled—and the look in her eyes that establish her insanity with an immediacy that no dialogue could achieve.

While it might be suggested that the scene in which Umaprasad seeks counsel from his teacher is one that borders on the didactic and might even be done without, it must be stressed that no other scene, no matter how memorable it may be in itself, detracts from the syntactical integrity of the film as a whole. It is only in the final scene that Ray allows a departure from the stark realism of the rest of the film, and it is a touch of sheer brilliance: Dayamayee leaves the house dressed in her finery, enters a vast field of flowers and is consumed, as it were, by mist. Immediately the iconic head of the goddess, seen as background to the opening titles, appears to accommodate the closing ones.

Sadgati is a radically different kind of film from *Devi*, as one might fairly expect of a film made in 1981 against a film made twenty-one years earlier. There are obvious surface differences: *Devi* is in Bengali, runs for a little over an hour and a half and is in black and white; *Sadgati* is in Hindi, was made primarily as a film for television running for fifty-two minutes and is in colour. *Devi* focuses on superstition juxtaposed with notions of the new learning, whereas *Sadgati* focuses purely on the plain bitterness of prejudice, without any assertion of contradistinction. The setting of *Devi* in the nineteenth century does at least tend to consign it to 'history',[8] while *Sadgati* could apply to the time in which the film was made as well as to the time when it first appeared as a short story by Premchand in 1931; sadly, it is just as applicable in many parts of India even today.

The film covers a day in the life of Dukhi, a *chamar* or tanner by caste and a grass-cutter by occupation,[9] hence an untouchable. The narrative proceeds by contrast to provide a profoundly disturbing view of the inhumanity innate to the essential inequality of the Hindu caste system. The focal contrast of the film is that between Dukhi and Ghasiram, the village brahman priest, but there are also incidental contrasts to be drawn between Dukhi's home and that of Ghasiram, and between Dukhi's wife and daughter and Ghasiram's wife and son. The story is based on the simple desire of Dukhi to have Ghasiram determine an auspicious day for the betrothal of his daughter, Dhania, a little girl not too old to play hopscotch.

For Dukhi this request to Ghasiram is based on more than just a desire; to see his daughter married and, preferably, married happily, is a social responsibility of all Hindu fathers enjoined by religion. Dukhi would risk excommunication from his caste—

[8] Such a consigning must, of course, be largely an illusion as there is plenty to suggest that superstition continues to thrive in modern India.

[9] In modern times the traditional occupation of a caste is not necessarily followed by most of its members.

its extreme lowliness is immaterial—were he to be neglectful in arranging his daughter's marriage. Moreover, the genuine affection he shows her indicates his sense of responsibility and profound concern for her welfare and happiness. For him, this is a very important day.

We first see him as he is preparing for his visit to the priest. He is putting together a large bundle of grass which he has cut as an offering to the brahman as food for his cow. As he is finishing this work, his wife Jhuria comes to him and the conversation that ensues explains his intention to visit Ghasiram and the other preparations that will need to be attended to out of respect for the brahman and the important task he will be requested to do on behalf of their daughter. Basic to all of this is an acute awareness of the brahman's vulnerability to touch, especially among people as lowly as themselves, and a concern that he not be polluted while visiting them. Thus, it would be necessary to make from *neem* leaves a mat for him to sit on and a plate for him to eat from. It is also in this early scene that two important signposts are given for the direction of the narrative: the first is Dukhi's stumble under the weight of his bundle of grass, prompting Jhuria to informatively remark on his recent illness; the second is Dukhi's haste in going out, asserting that he does not have time to eat. But then he is expecting, perhaps, to be home again quite soon, heralding the brahman's arrival.

The repudiation of Dukhi's simple expectation provides the basis for the film's drama, which consists in the tension between the untouchable's need and the extent of the Brahman's disposition to satisfy it. This tension evolves out of the interaction between the chamar and the brahman and is conditioned by the definitive and emphatic contrast between the two men, a contrast carved by tradition into the granite of the Hindu caste system.

Two early views establish this contrast. The first visual impression we are given of Dukhi is of a man who must labour

to survive. The discussion with Jhuria about the provision of hospitality for Ghasiram and the external shots of their own humble dwelling are a clear indication of the reality of hardship in his life, while reference to his illness and his perceived need to forego his meal are indicative of the fact that good health is something of a luxury for people of Dukhi's class. On the other hand, the first we see of Ghasiram is of a man sitting before a mirror, absorbed in the business of decorating his forehead in preparation for the performance of his morning rituals. Unlike Dukhi he is a man of ample build, living in a fine house with rather more than the one room that houses Dukhi and his wife and daughter. This incipient contrast is then advanced by a very skilfully directed change of mood as we see Dukhi, who left home as the undisputed master of his own domain, now become the obsequious petitioner who, because of accident of birth, must prostrate himself before another man. The fact of the matter is that the brahman, on this hot day, is somewhat disinclined to visit the nearby hovel of a chamar in order to consult his almanac to find an auspicious day for the betrothal of the untouchable's daughter. Of course, he cannot refuse to go—that would be a breach of his own duty—and so he prevaricates, keeping Dukhi busy in the meantime with menial tasks to which one such as Ghasiram may never stoop.

Ray is meticulous in demonstrating with consummate subtlety the distinction in manners that characterises the mutual relations between Dukhi and Ghasiram. Indeed, the reification of caste is manifest more than in anything else in human attitudes one to another, and *Sadgati* offers an incisive representation of the utter subservience of the lowly to their superiors and the arrogant disdain in which the latter so naturally hold the former. It is one of the astonishing anomalies of Indian democracy that one man should be expected to physically abase himself out of respect to another, while little more than contempt might be expected in return.

When Dukhi appears at the back door of Ghasiram's house, he is first noticed by the brahman's wife. Her look is one of cold antagonism. Her young son appears briefly. He is much the same age as Dukhi's daughter, Dhania, but has already learned to look at his inferiors in a way that mirrors the disdain on his mother's face. Ghasiram rebukes him sharply, sending him off to school, and it is easy to sense that he is protecting his finely dressed son from the polluting presence of the lowborn Dukhi. Ghasiram is formally courteous in greeting the chamar but obviously displeased to see him. In response to Dukhi's invitation and the pleas that he "has arranged everything", the brahman points out, as though explaining something complex to a dull child, that he is too busy to go just now and will try to find time later. The looks on the faces of the wife and son have already lent interpretation to Ghasiram's words. He then goes on to strengthen the show of contempt by ordering Dukhi to sweep the veranda. Dukhi asks where he might put the offering of grass he has brought and receives a dismissive direction, quite devoid of any tinge of gratitude, to "put it with the cow, of course".

We note Dukhi's thoroughness in sweeping the veranda. After all, what he requires from the brahman is too important to let slip by through shoddy workmanship, and Ghasiram too realises this only too well. Once the sweeping is done, Dukhi is set to another task, this time moving a large load of chaff from the shed across the way to the cowshed. This sequence is presented without any hurry at all. Having shown Dukhi stumble under the weight of the bundle of grass and then go out on his visit to the brahman on an empty stomach, Ray is careful to measure out the distance from shed to cowshed, to show Dukhi's thoroughness once again in filling the bags, and to reveal the signs of distress in his struggle to carry them. Dukhi's increasing exhaustion is becoming gradually more significant. Without any word of appreciation or encouragement Ghasiram then directs

Dukhi to chop up a large log of wood near the house. While the directions are being given—it is to be cut up into small pieces—the camera notes Dukhi's face. Whatever the man may feel—disappointment, annoyance, outrage, or despair at his weak and hungry body—he cannot show it, as the consequences of such perverse individualism will be suffered by his daughter.

The log of wood becomes a virtual character in the film, a silent, inexorable demon. As Dukhi surveys it, the audience is able to take in the gargantuan nature of the task of chopping it: it is a gnarled lump some four or five feet long and up to maybe two and a half feet thick; Dukhi's unsuccessful attempt to roll it over is some indication of its weight. The job might be done in fifteen minutes or so with a chainsaw; Dukhi has a blunt, small-headed axe. The odds are well in favour of the demon, who is aided by a formidable accomplice—the oppressive heat of the north Indian summer. Dukhi offers a couple of swings of the axe, which only skids across the surface of the wood, making no impression on it at all, and even after the blade has been sharpened on a rock, it merely scratches rather than penetrates the surface of the log. This is a very simple scene yet a very dramatic one, making it ominously clear that, on top of an unexpectedly inauspicious morning, Dukhi is now beset by an impossible task which, for the sake of his little girl, he has no choice but to complete. The simple procedure that he had earlier put to his wife has now become cloaked in despair as he battles an unbeatable foe with an inadequate weapon, not fully recovered from fever and on an empty stomach, in the intense heat of the north Indian summer.

Ray will not let us forget the contrast in the lives of two men. While the cruelty that Dukhi is obliged to suffer has been established, the plight of the busy brahman may be considered. Ghasiram has indeed been busy while Dukhi has been toiling. He has been sitting in the relative cool of his house, counselling with well-worn platitudes from the *Gita* a young man who has

lost his wife. His advice to the young man contains no sympathy for the loss of a young woman he may well have loved, but enjoins him simply to take another wife, produce a son and see to the continuity of his name. The clichéd quotation[10] and the injunction both focus on the interests and convenience of the living, and reflect quite pointedly the egocentric callousness of Ghasiram himself. Nevertheless, the young man is heartened, and Ghasiram then sits down to a hearty lunch after which he must retire to his bed for a well-earned rest.

While the lowly chamar has been out of sight, he might have been out of mind, but now he intrudes yet again on Ghasiram's privacy, this time seeking a light for a smoke given him by a kindly villager. The good brahman's wife is appalled that he should come this time to the front of the house, so threatening to defile it. Ghasiram reassures her that such a fear is unfounded, and that as Dukhi has been working for them for no pay, it would not be unreasonable of her to give him a few coals to light his pipe. Still motivated by her threat to scorch his face, her charity extends to unceremoniously flinging a few burning coals at Dukhi, who expresses his gratitude and offers his apologies before leaving (we might well deem him to be infinitely more gracious than his superiors). Something very odd then happens: both the wife and the priest are moved to wonder whether or not Dukhi might be hungry. Of course, it is far too hot to be put to the bother of cooking anything for him, but there are some chapatis left over from the previous night. The problem of having to go to the trouble of actually giving them to him is solved by Ghasiram's wise insight—"These chamars need more than a few leftover chapatis to keep them going." And so Dukhi goes without, having to appease the rage in his stomach with tobacco smoke.

[10] "As a man lays aside outworn garments and takes others that are new, so the soul puts away outworn bodies and goes to others that are new." *Bhagavadgita,* in Nicol MacNicol (ed), *Hindu Scriptures,* Everyman, 1938.

It is interesting to speculate on whether or not the passing concern for Dukhi's stomach suggests some small element of humanity on the part of this haughty couple. Whatever we may briefly suspect, Ray's judgement is made manifest in the solution to the problem. Their seeming interest in the labourer's hunger is really immaterial; what is pertinent is the utterly heartless rationalisation that expedites the evanescence of that fleeting concern.

The contrast between high and low according to the caste system has by now been made strikingly clear, and Ray introduces an element that serves to place it in some rational perspective. He does this through the character of a member of another low caste, a Gond.[11] The man appears quite without warning and is first seen watching from behind a tree Dukhi's fruitless endeavour to chop the log. The look of astonishment on his face is his first comment, silently articulating the amazement that may well be in the mind of the viewer, appalled that a man should be engaged in such a futile task in such heat. The viewer knows more than the Gond does at this stage, but the Gond's look is significant in prompting the audience to assemble the whole picture that also involves Dukhi's poor health, the brahman's eating a fine lunch inside his comfortable home and, behind it all, Dukhi's over-riding responsibility to his daughter and Ghasiram's easy avoidance of his duty on account of his personal disposition.

The Gond speaks the voice of simple human reason. Observing Dukhi's failure to make an impression on the wood, he asks him if he has ever chopped wood before. Dukhi replies in the negative, adding that he has cut only grass. This prompts the next rational question from the Gond, "Then why are you cutting wood?" After all, it is the logic of caste that grass-cutters cut grass and woodcutters cut wood. Dukhi replies that he has been ordered to do the work by Ghasiram, prompting a knowing, dry

[11] The Gonds are not as lowly as the Chamars, and by some twist of tradition are considered fit to offer food and drink to Brahmans.

smile from the Gond. Dukhi hastens to add that he could have cut the wood had he eaten, so evincing the Gond's amazement, now as much on behalf of the audience as himself, that the priest has not fed his worker. He tells Dukhi quite reasonably to go and ask for food, but Dukhi is only too aware of his lowly station and declares his inability to do such a thing—the priest's finding a date will be enough to make him content. It is here that the Gond assumes something of a political purpose, just as he is given in Premchand's story. In telling Dukhi to ask for food, he is in effect telling him to stand up to his superiors. Later he will tell the other chamars not to remove Dukhi's dead body for the convenience of the brahmans as the chamar's death is a police matter, so implying criminal negligence on the part of Ghasiram, even though such charges are rarely, if ever, brought against brahmans. The Gond impatiently walks away from Dukhi after his expression of subservience, but his heart is immediately softened to learn that the poor man does not even have a smoke. He takes Dukhi to his own humble shack and provides him with a pipe and tobacco, but is unable to give him a coal with which to light it—and this is what brings Dukhi to the lady of Ghasiram's house.

Dukhi is a nuisance to Ghasiram. He may compensate to some extent by the odd jobs he does for him, but he remains an irritant nevertheless. His original request is one that the priest is duty-bound to fulfil, but it is hot and the priest has other, less demanding, things to do. Dukhi interrupts the priest's counselling of the widowed young man in order ask where the axe is and later disturbs the tranquillity of the brahman's lunch in seeking coals to light his pipe. Quite unwittingly he even disturbs the brahman's afternoon nap, for Ghasiram wakes up with a start quite early (just after 2.20, to be precise). Perhaps he was dreaming of Dukhi wielding his ineffectual axe, for he gets up immediately and goes straight outside to see Dukhi asleep under a tree, the monstrous log still quite intact. It is

more than a little ironic that Ghasiram, who has been sleeping after a satisfying lunch, angrily censures Dukhi for sleeping, albeit on an empty stomach, instead of doing an impossible task for which he will not be paid. His tyrannical demeanour frightens Dukhi back to work, and we are then presented with a particularly distressing picture of inequality: the sick and hungry unpaid labourer frantically wielding his axe while the well-fed, comfortable brahman goads him on with inane instructions such as "Use your strength!" and "Chop harder!" like a spectator barracking a sportsman. Satisfied that he has contributed to keeping the lower orders in due place, Ghasiram goes back to his rest.

This scene successfully brings us to two peaks: one is the narrative climax for Dukhi, where the poor man's heart gives out under the excessive duress inflicted on his weakened body; the other is an emotional point at which the execrable callousness of Ghasiram would *seem* to have reached an extreme. Ghasiram's return to his charpoy is followed by a surrealistic sequence of shots depicting Dukhi's frenzy with the axe for the sake of his daughter. There is one stroke too many and he drops dead beside his invincible adversary. But even in death Dukhi will be a threat to Ghasiram's serenity, for the good brahman's sleep is once again interrupted, this time by his son's telling him that the chamar is lying dead beside the uncut log.

The contrast between the self-interested brahman and the reasonable and humane Gond is now made clear in just a couple of shots. We see Ghasiram run in horror from the dead chamar; a chamar is untouchable enough but a dead one is even more so. Then we see the Gond kneeling beside a fellow human being, one whom he knows to have suffered most unjustly, feeling his upper body to try to find a pulse. With this simple picture, the superstitious and inhumane brahman is instantly diminished.

Ghasiram's one concern is to prevent further inconvenience to himself; the Gond wants to ensure that the brahman is not

exonerated of his responsibility for the unnecessary death of an innocent man. In abstract terms Ray is now juxtaposing the Gond's decency and justice with the brahman's snivelling self-interest. In narrative terms this is made evident, on the one hand, by the Gond going to the chamar community and directing them not to move Dukhi's body, as it is the subject of a police case (the police will not come, of course, "Not in this rain," as Ghasiram confidently asserts). The mere mention of the police is more than enough to frighten them into submission. On the other hand we have some terse dialogue between Ghasiram and his wife on what is now for them a double-headed problem: how to avoid responsibility for Dukhi's death, and how to remove his body from the path outside their house that leads to the well, so preventing themselves and other brahmans from getting water. Yet another element of annoyance momentarily threatens their well-being as the distraught and grieving Jhuria comes running toward their house, crying out for an answer to the simple question, "Why did you let him die?" Fortunately the brahman's wife is able to bar the doors in time to ward off yet another low-caste nuisance.

The ending of the film is truly astonishing. Ghasiram works out an ingenious solution to the brahmans' problem, and Ray reveals his execution of it in a way that is so practical yet sickeningly perverse that many viewers will be left dumbfounded. Ghasiram is trying to think of a way out of his difficulty: there is a close shot of his head and shoulders, played on by a flash of lightning with the sound of thunder in the background. There is then a cut to the bare legs of the corpse and someone bending over it—we can guess it to be Ghasiram from the man's gleaming white dhoti and the sacred thread of the brahman hanging from his neck. With a hook-shaped stick he lifts Dukhi's right leg and then slips a noose around it, tightening it at the ankle. Then he proceeds to drag what was a short time ago a woman's husband and a little girl's father some distance away to

the carrion dump, where he leaves it for the animals and vultures.

Ghasiram has been quite ingenious in removing a potential source of stench from the vicinity of his house as well as restoring to other brahmans the convenience of collecting water without threat of pollution, all without touching the dreaded corpse. While this might win him accolades from others of his own caste, Ray's depiction of his act reveals him as vile and monstrous. This man who could not go out in the heat to attend to one of his duties, and whose wife has just barred their door against a grieving widow, now goes out into the rain to drag through the mud—with what is for him tremendous physical effort—the corpse of a man he had exploited to his death. As a matter of simple human decency dead bodies are usually treated with at least a modicum of respect; this one is desecrated. Ghasiram's utter lack of humanity is written indelibly in this crude and callous action.

Ray offers some ten shots to describe the removal of the corpse of Dukhi. Some of these are quite realistic, through which it is clear that the man with the sacred thread around his neck and the length of rope over his shoulder, struggling to summon up all of what limited physical strength he has to convey his burden, is Ghasiram, priest and pandit of the sacred law. But there are other shots, usually on a rise with the evening sky filling the background of most of the frame, where the man performing this sordid task is seen in virtual silhouette, and it is these shots which elevate the story above its particular moorings to give it, most disquietingly, a sense of universality and a semblance of immutability. The last shot in the sequence underlines the cold-blooded inhumanity of Ghasiram: the priest stops and the corpse is at last still, and then the camera draws back to reveal the gruesome environment of the carrion dump.

The rain has washed away the unpleasantness of the previous day, and as the sun shines on a new morning the final scene shows us Ghasiram, the devout brahman, attending to mumbo-

jumbo as he was in the shots that introduced him to us. He has recently bathed and is purifying the precinct of his home by piously flicking holy Ganges water here and there while muttering holy words in Sanskrit. Ray's economy is superb—his film closes with the epitome of hypocrisy and superstition.

Sadgati is a biting condemnation of caste-sanctioned inhumanity, but it also pours a modern scorn on some of the more absurd fundamentals of age-old caste philosophy. In particular, Ray focuses on the Hindu's almost hysterical fear of being touched by someone of a low caste or, worse, a corpse. We are confronted early in the film with this upper-caste fear, ironically enough, when Dukhi gives his wife instructions about making mats and plates out of *neem* leaves and warning her not to touch the uncooked food items that will be offered to the brahman as payment. We note the startled look on the face of the brahman's son as he sees a chamar in such close proximity when Dukhi first comes to Ghasiram's house. Later there is the menacing anger of the brahman's wife when Dukhi threatens to pollute their house with his presence, followed by her self-righteous flinging at him of the coals he craves to light his pipe.

Such quaint fussiness might be somewhat understandable if it reflected mere social inequality. Its more serious pre-modern ramifications of superstition lie, however, not so much in undemocratic social structures but in an absurdly unscientific fear of the power of the lowly to transmit pollution by touch. The group of brahman gentlemen who gather in great concern and then confront Ghasiram are genuinely worried that they will soon run out of water as the corpse of a chamar lies on the path to their well and the other chamars are refusing to remove it. Presumably they will be beset by untold woe should they bathe in or drink water that has been carried past such an abomination. They cannot remove the obstacle themselves, for to touch it involves an even more direct threat of pollution. If simply left where it is, it will, as the brahman's wife so urgently

fears, start to smell. All of this comprises a vicious circle broken only by the grotesque solution to the problem devised and executed by Ghasiram; given their demonstrable ignorance, other brahmans would hail him as a hero for delivering them from pollution. Ray's utterly unsympathetic revelation of high-caste delusion and stupidity here is immensely more pungent than his blatant attack on superstition in *Devi*.

Given the economy of the narrative and the clarity of its exposition the callousness of the brahman is readily seen for what it is, while his inhumanity is intensified by the utterly unadorned character of Dukhi. Indeed, the chamar's appeal is in his abject ordinariness. However, he is given quality by the inter-cut shots of Jhuria and Dhania anxiously watching for the return of the man of their house. Here we are readily reminded of the simple humanity of Dukhi as a man loved and needed by his wife and daughter, while this perception of him serves well to emphasise the heartlessness and contemptuousness of the brahman and his wife.

The film is a candid attack on upper-caste arrogance, superciliousness and self-interest, and the extent to which a man might unreasonably exploit another through the power he traditionally has over him by accident of birth. Nor is Ray ignorant of the fact that unconscionable callousness and cruelty are so often seen by low-caste people as their lot. Dukhi makes clear that corresponding to high-caste arrogance is an inherent low-caste acceptance of inferiority. He philosophically concedes the right of the brahman's wife to fling coals at him by observing, "If chamars weren't such fools, we wouldn't get kicked so much." Dukhi's servile demeanour prompts the mild rebelliousness of the Gond and his brief utterance of modernism, while there is an underlying perception of the unconstitutional power of the few over the many and the economic inequities that stem from this. For example, Dukhi is obliged by the power of tradition to work for Ghasiram without pay, yet he has already spent

more than he can afford to pay the brahman for work that he deliberately continues to shirk.

There are four significant non-human elements in the film. Mention has already been made of the indomitable log of wood and the oppressively intense heat. At the end of the day the clouds are seen to gather in the sky, just as the chamars gather to hear the defiant words of the Gond and the brahmans gather to alert Ghasiram to imminent disaster. Tears well up in the eyes of Dukhi's little girl, while her mother, caught up among a herd of cows coming home for the night, is overwhelmed first by shock and then by grief. This emotional crescendo is poetically matched by the dramatic effect of the stormy accumulation in the sky. The rain also has a visual effect, especially in the creation of mud and slime through which the desecrated corpse of Dukhi is dragged. Moreover, there is an element of irony in the inversion of the customary notion of rain bringing relief at the end of a hot day. The rain also provides an easy punctuation mark in the structure of the film, underlining artistically the division between the life and death of Dukhi. Symbolically it might carry the conventional suggestion of cleansing, but what is being cleansed of what? It might seem politically incorrect to say that the brahman village is being cleansed of the pollution of a chamar corpse, but when we remember the title of the film, 'deliverance' in English but carrying in Hindi the sense of 'spiritual salvation' or 'final beatitude', the weight of the irony becomes apparent.

The fourth non-human element, appearing from time to time throughout the film, is the huge edifice in the village street near Ghasiram's house. On the surface it is a hideous, garish, monstrous Hindu icon, evoking the kind of anthropomorphic, idolatrous Hinduism for which Ray felt a strong aversion. It may warrant closer consideration, however. The gaudily painted sculpture is of the 'demonic' deity, Ravana, his ten heads symbolising his learning and wisdom and his twenty arms indicating his physical prowess. Because of the strength of his

devotion, the god Brahma granted him the boon of invulnerability, a gift which, in his arrogance, Ravana abused by making all the other gods subservient to himself. Because of his continuing pride he was eventually slain by the god Vishnu, incarnate as Rama. There are, clearly, certainly semblances of Ravana to be seen in the brahmans, who have made all other men subservient to themselves. Ghasiram quite obviously evinces vices such as the abuse of status, arrogance and self-interest. There is, of course, a limit as to how far symbolism might be taken; certainly it would be drawing a rather long bow to see the excessive concupiscence of Ravana corresponding to Ghasiram's three marriages. The interpretation of symbols can certainly be overdone, and given the fact that the icon would not be recognisable to most of Ray's non-Indian audience, the surface interpretation is, for them at least, probably sufficient.

Sadgati is a profoundly disquieting film. A masterpiece of understatement, it is deceptively gentle in pace and action, yet it is ridden with physical, mental and emotional violence. The unhurried working out of its simple plot allows for an incisive, forensic unravelling of the perversity that underlies life in this outwardly peaceful north Indian village. In so many ways the film reveals Ray's work at its best: the superb adaptation of a classic story, his own tensely sparse script, the elevation of the importance of the visual and the consequently superb art direction and camera work, and the music—also by Ray—which, like the script, is minimal and, especially in its percussive passages towards the end, contributes subtly to the growing unease. However, there are very few films in which we may marvel at acting as brilliant as we have here. Every role is carefully crafted and given a polished performance of the highest standard, but it must be said that Mohan Agashe's chillingly convincing portrayal of Ghasiram must rate as one of the most memorable performances in all Indian cinema.

There is an interval of twenty-one years between *Devi* and *Sadgati*, and the differences between the two films are probably

more numerous than the similarities. There are the obvious surface differences of colour and language. A little more significant is the fact that *Devi* is a conventional feature film, whereas *Sadgati*, produced by Doordarshan, was made as a telefilm running for just fifty-two minutes. Thus the narrative of *Devi* is more complex and its development more intricate. Given the time constraint, complexity and intricacy are not appropriate to *Sadgati*; its narrative has only a few major steps and is presented by a much smaller cast. However, the intensity of the focus and the restraint on pace together serve to make *Sadgati* as exceptionally powerful a film as *Devi*. Music is notably less prominent in *Sadgati*, where it has the major effect of enhancing the tension, whereas in *Devi* it complements the atmosphere much more fully than would have been necessary in the later film.

Both films are blessed with remarkably fine casts and an extraordinarily high standard of acting, but what is truly salient in the common authorship of these films is the profound morality and humanist conscience that underline them both. Ray's social criticism is strong without being acrimonious, although he does present Ghasiram—justly—with hardly a redeeming feature. Indeed, here is another significant difference between the two films: the alleged villains of the earlier film are treated with a degree of compassion that in no way extends to those of the later work. Nevertheless, the attack on the offence more than on the perpetrator is prominent in both cases. Kalikinkar Roy is an ignorant, doting old fool, but one quite without malice and whose intentions are sincerely good. Dayamayee is largely uneducated, and her virtue of faithful obedience is distorted by circumstances into gullibility. Neither can be blamed – they know no better. Here the so-called villains are also victims, whose consequent losses are immeasurable, the actual villains being ignorance and superstition. In *Sadgati* the victim is the protagonist, and through his being the sufferer of the injustice

of the antagonist, he earns the pity of the audience, something which cannot be extended to the perpetrator of the cruelty. It might be pleaded that, like Kalikinkar, Ghasiram knows no different, that he is a victim of a tradition from which his innate attitudes have been generated. Ray certainly delivers a staunch attack on that tradition, but we are unable to ignore the fact that caste is the social super-structure of Brahmanism, and brahmans like Ghasiram in fact profit from the unjust and wicked system that they continue to uphold. Ray gives us ample and good reason to pity Dukhi and his family; he is also subtly careful, through the character of the Gond, to suggest the righteousness of dissent from wickedness. There is a moment when it would seem that the brahman and his wife do have what might have been a redeeming sense of pity for Dukhi in his hunger, but overriding selfish concerns prevent that sense from being translated into any kind of deed, and on this fundamental moral failing they stand condemned.

Hindu tradition, given its vast antiquity, has accumulated over the ages many cobwebs. A truly reformed, modern society demands that what might have been pertinent to an earlier age, but which is now anomalous, should be swept away. *Devi* and *Sadgati,* two works of superb cinema, give voice to the lofty ideals of reform of a truly humane thinker and artist whose critical concern for social advancement is germane to so much of his better work.

8 An Eye on the Past: *Shatranj Ke Khilari, Ashani Sanket*

An interest in the past is not necessarily the same thing as an interest in history. The academic discipline of history goes far beyond the telling of stories set in earlier times. Satyajit Ray would never have claimed to be a maker of historical films, one whose educated interest in history might have urged him to make interpretations of the past according, as far as is possible, to the conventions of the literary historian or even of the documentary filmmaker. Nevertheless, his concern for the past is acute and his vital awareness of such basic laws of history as the inevitability of change through time and the social conflicts and dislocations often consequent upon such change is evident in one way or another in a number of his films. However, the historian so often looks for generalities in interpreting the past, while broader trends are of intellectual interest to Ray only in so far as they provide contexts for his more sensitive concern for individuals who get caught up in them.

The films of the Apu trilogy, especially the first two, may give an impression of an unchanging world in the 'timeless'

village and the 'age-old' Benares, yet what gives the trilogy its impetus is the ancient and very historical notion of the doctrine of flux—that nothing stays the same and to resist change is futile. The poignancy of *Jalsaghar* emanates largely out of the protagonist's delusion that he can remain steadfastly self-sufficient in the midst of change. The first and third films of *Tin Kanya* offer interesting descriptive insights into aspects of nineteenth century social history, as do *Devi, Charulata* and *Ghare Baire* in addition to offering some appreciation of a macrocosmic maelstrom in which microcosmic tension is examined. *Kanchanjungha* gives incidental but significant food for thought about the value of India's independence and the struggle that went to attain it, while the films of the triptych may be described as a valuable social document of the turbulent seventies in Calcutta. Thus, notions of history, as distinct from comprehensive treatments of history, underlie a number of Ray's films.

In addition to *Ghare Baire* Ray made two films with actual historical contexts. *Shatranj Ke Khilari* ("The Chess Players", 1977) finds its moorings in the turmoil of the controversial annexation of Oudh in 1856, and *Ashani Sanket* ("Distant Thunder", 1973) is set amid the devastating famine that claimed the lives of millions of Bengalis in 1943. In neither film, nor in *Ghare Baire* for that matter, does Ray seek to present history as such, examining a problem and its demonstrable causes and effects, but rather he focuses on human interest as it may be affected by certain historical circumstances. However, it is important to point out that Ray does not play with the past nor treat history with casual respect, for his background research for these films has been extraordinarily thorough. His uncompromising commitment to getting the context right has provided the superstructure for the credibility of whatever it may be that interests him about his characters and their situations. While there is a negligible difference in time between the release of each film, there is nearly a century between the historical

settings in which they are based. And while *Shatranj Ke Khilari*—the earlier in terms of history—is very obviously a period piece, there is little to obviously date *Ashani Sanket*; however, each film presents Indian life at a time when it was subject to the ruthless self-interest of a foreign, imperialist power.

Under the so-called 'doctrine of lapse' developed by the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie (1848–56), a native Indian state would be subsumed by the East Company government under certain circumstances, such as its ruler dying without leaving a legitimate heir or by the ruler being demonstrably guilty of poor government. In the case of the Kingdom of Oudh, it had been guaranteed by treaty that should the latter condition arise, the ruler might be deprived of his right to govern but not of his kingship. Dalhousie, however, sought to deprive Wajid Ali Shah of both, and it is this cynical manoeuvre that forms the basis of *Shatranj Ke Khilari,* derived from a short story by Premchand.

The film follows two parallel themes. One tells of the pressure brought to bear on King Wajid Ali Shah to abdicate and his reaction to that demand. The other is the story of Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, two of Lucknow's gentlemen of leisure single-mindedly given to playing chess with one another. The two themes are not intertwined and remain discrete throughout, although the pertinence of one to the other is that which gives the film its special richness. Moreover, the general mood of one theme bears more contrast than similarity to that of the other. Although moments of mirth and bemusement from Richard Attenborough, who plays the role of General Outram, the Company's Resident at Lucknow, lend an element of light-heartedness to the grand imperial theme, its dominant mood emanates from the self-defined sense of tragedy and its touches of melodrama played out by Amjad Khan as King Wajid. On the other hand, light-heartedness defines the lives of Mirza and Mir, brilliantly played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey

respectively, while even their most serious moments cannot go far enough beyond melodrama to be described as dramatic.

The narration, given by the now legendary Amitabh Bachchan,[1] begins before the first title and provides historical data essential to the film; this continues into what might be described as an overture sequence before the characters start to interact. The opening shot is of a full chessboard, over which a hand on either side is seen moving and taking pieces by turn. Before the titles start to appear, the narration begins in a very lofty style, referring to mighty generals deploying their forces on the battlefield. The irony of this will be underlined later when we see that the actual players of the game come to see themselves as generals, while the generals are little more than players of a game. The Conquest of Oudh would not find a place in the history of military triumphs, as it was, in effect, little more than a very one-sided game of chess. As the Narrator puts it, "If the king is lost, the game is lost."

After the last title the Narrator introduces the characters. Interest in this introductory section is maintained by a variety of visuals: cinematography, portraits and other paintings, facsimiles of documents and cartoon animation. The camera has already drawn back to reveal Mirza and Mir as the two 'generals' on either side of the chessboard—or chess cloth, to be precise. We are told who they are, and learn little more about them than the fact that they are of the landed gentry and, therefore, do no work, spending all their time playing chess while being waited on by servants.

There is then a close shot of a vast archway in the Mughal style, and the camera draws back to reveal the magnificence of the palace complex at Lucknow, now the centre of Muslim culture in India after the decline of the Mughal Empire. The grandeur of that culture is trumpeted by the obvious splendour of its

[1] Bachchan had established his fame in Romesh Sippy's *Sholay* two years before *Shatranj Ke Khilari* was made.

architecture, and the prominence of other arts will be noted later. There are a few shots of the gentle pastimes of the people, such as the flying of kites and pigeons, and, as though to provide a balance, the less refined indulgence of the hoi-polloi in such things as cock-fighting and, later, goat-fighting.

Thus an essential background has been offered for the introduction of Wajid Ali Shah, first represented by an empty throne, for empty that throne will be at the end of this game of chess, and then by the throne with the King himself seated on it. We are told that the King is one not enamoured of statecraft but more inclined to more refined pursuits. There is a brief and very colourful sequence representing his love of music and dance, and another of him in comfortable repose among some of his many concubines; in between these sequences there is a shot of the King beating a drum in a Mohurrum procession, thus alluding to his reputation for piety. In short, the King is fond of the crown and the throne, but not of government.

Ray uses that crown as a symbolic link between the Kingdom of Oudh and the British East India Company. A painting depicting the Great Exhibition of 1851 provides a reference to King Wajid's having sent his crown to be displayed there, and this leads to a shot of a facsimile of a document in which it is regretted that the king would have done his people a service had he sent the crown with his head inside it; the document also describes Oudh as 'a cherry ripe for the picking'. The writer, of course, is the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, and the camera zooms in on a portrait of him to reveal the most salient feature of his face, his slit-like mouth, which suggests a meanness that gives to the face the features of the philistine that stamped so ubiquitously British rule in India. The Narrator tells us that Dalhousie was 'inordinately fond of cherries', and an animated sequence gives one interpretation of Dalhousie's barefaced policy of acquisition. Other shots of contemporary paintings show the nature of acquisition far more realistically, so reminding us of

the destructiveness wrought by merchants who sought by force of arms to set their country's bounds wider still and wider.

This introductory section is significant in a number of ways. First, in its variety of form and style, with the narrator basic to it all, it is set off as distinct from the film that it introduces; the still photographs and animations will not reappear, although the narrator will continue to have a limited role. Second, it is an entertaining and economical endeavour to acquaint the viewer with a condensed historical background and to introduce some of the characters in their own cultural sphere. Thirdly, it raises some of the notions of culture conflict that will be prominent in this film and that have coloured so much of the history of British imperialism. Simply and fundamentally we have here the confrontation between Indian aesthetic values and the mercantile interests of a foreign power in command of formidable military strength. The distinction between the two is visually reinforced by the colourful and imaginatively designed setting of the Wajid Ali scenes and the dull, formal browns of those of the Resident.

The opening scene introduces the most significant representative of those mercantile interests, the Resident of Lucknow, General Outram. Outram is a Scot, a mixture of the bourgeois and the military, clever but shallow and insensitive. The other character in this scene is his aide, Captain Weston, a significant member of the military wing of the Company administration. He is an interesting character who provides an antithesis to Outram, for not only is Weston's a voice to be listened to on Hindustani and its cultural import but he is also something of an aficionado of its poetry. In a sense he is caught in a bind in that he has a profound appreciation for that to which Outram is stonily indifferent, while depending on Outram for his own advancement.

The purpose of the scene is to put forward the case against Wajid Ali Shah, the first step in justifying—or rationalising a

justification for—the planned British takeover of Oudh. Outram's 'evidence' is an hour-by-hour report on the King's activities of the previous day in which his devotion to prayer, his kite-flying, his attention to his concubines and his writing of poetry and songs serve to convince Outram of Wajid's unworthiness as a king. It is an amusing scene, not so much in that we share Outram's derision of Wajid Ali Shah, but rather in finding in Attenborough's performance a lot to laugh at in General Outram. Whereas Weston can justify the King's attention to prayers five times a day as enjoined by the Koran and can recite some of his poetry and appreciate his songs, Outram sees the cultivated Indian ruler as inefficient, irresponsible and even effeminate. This is the essence of the case that will be used as justification for the annexation of the kingdom and the removal of the crown from the King; it will be noted that there is no evidence offered of any ill effects of this "irresponsible" rule, such as popular disaffection, for example. Weston is easily cajoled not to disagree with Outram's judgement, as the general, with little subtlety, lets him know that his promotion is dependent on his full support.

There follows a gentle reminder of the contrast between the sacred and the profane. On the one hand we have just witnessed Outram plotting a cynical manoeuvre flying in the face of what was assumed to have been an honourably negotiated treaty. The cut from Outram is to three shots of *namaz* or prescribed prayer, a responsibility of all Muslims irrespective of their role or status in society. Namaz may be seen as a unifying factor among Muslim people in general in communion with their God; hence, the first shot is of a group of ordinary men, the second of the King, and the third of the two gentlemen of leisure, Mir and Mirza, all of them performing the same devotions. This brief trio of shots has no narrative connection (although one may well suspect that the loftier thoughts of Mir and Mirza are somehow related to victory at chess), the simple effect of it being to underline the

cultural chasm that lies between the English Company and the people over whom they presume to rule.

The distinction between the rational or pragmatic and the affective or sentimental is elucidated further when we come to witness the King's reaction to the English stratagem. Outram has directed the Prime Minister to request his King to examine the new 'treaty', for the 'irrevocable' word of the Governor-General declaring that the cherry of Oudh must be picked has just arrived by military courier from Calcutta. It is a treaty in name only, for Wajid Ali Shah does not have the option of rejecting or even of modifying it. The cut is to a shot of the king being entertained by what the likes of Outram would describe as 'a song and dance act', a beautifully presented performance of fine Indian music and dance. The ambience is one of opulence, but no more so, one might imagine, than that displayed at any of the royal courts of Europe, including that at Windsor. The fact that the King is not seated upright on a chair but is lounging in the Asiatic fashion among cushions and bolsters on the carpeted floor, fondling a cat, may lend credence to his prejudgement as a prodigal and a sybarite, but surface impressions may often mislead.

The aesthetic beauty of this scene is marred only by a shot of the face of the Prime Minister reflecting the pain of the news he has to convey to the King. Once the performance is finished and all but the Prime Minister have been dismissed, the King, noticing the tears of his minister, observes in sad irony that General Outram must have been singing *ghazals*[2] to him—a comic thought, even in this context—for "only poetry and music can bring tears to a man's eyes". The distraught minister then informs the King of his imminent and mandatory abdication. The cut is to two goats head-butting each other—a comment on the nature of the argument that will ensue, one that will be won not by reason or principle but by the threat of greater

[2] Songs of love.

brute strength. The next cut is to a royal herald announcing what amounts to a head-in-the-sand proclamation of severe punishment for anyone caught spreading rumours that the East India Company was planning military action in Oudh.

The King lines up his ministers and accuses them of having betrayed him in their failure to prevent this situation from arising. He offers no evidence for their alleged perfidy nor does he state how, exactly, they might have circumvented this cataclysmic turn of fortune. There is, however, a hint of elucidation in his verbal assault on the Prime Minister, declaring that he had let his King down by not tearing up the treaty and throwing it in Outram's face. The King, of course, is naive in the extreme, but when one is on the brink of ruin it sometimes helps to blame someone else. Quite reasonably he invokes the previous treaty, which stated that the Company might take over the administration but not remove the King. This is probably Wajid Ali Shah's strongest point, given that a little later even Outram confides to one of his number his discomfort at the fact that the dishonouring of a treaty brings discredit to the Company. "A treaty is a treaty," he declares.

However, Wajid Ali's predisposition is to emote. He descends into sentimentalism, declaring that he would never have become king in the first place but for his attraction to the pomp and splendour and all the trappings of kingship. He defends his rule as having been good at the beginning—after all, he had an army with such wonderful names for its regiments and a women's corps with such pretty girls on horseback. Another strong point is put: although Wajid may never have been meant to rule, his people had never opposed him but had always loved him. "I can see love in their eyes," he says, somewhat romantically, for one wonders just how many common pairs of eyes he has actually seen. Moreover, they love and sing his songs, and this leads him to wonder if Queen Victoria composes songs for her subjects to sing. Although this notion that his people support him is

contradicted by a report made by one Colonel Sleeman, the Prime Minister quite reasonably points out that a similar investigation in Bengal, where the Company ruled, might yield a similar report. Sleeman's impartiality might also be suspected.

King Wajid Ali Shah ends this scene on a note of defiance, observing that the soldiers of Oudh are among the finest in the world, and certainly the finest in the Company's army, so the Company is probably frightened at the prospect of armed conflict in Oudh. (The shambles that might well result from brother being ordered to shoot brother is, indeed, seen with some foreboding by Outram.) The Prime Minister is directed to inform the Resident that the Crown of Oudh is not his for the taking.

However, the man of steel soon softens. In fact, the Crown is not Wajid's for the keeping. No matter that the dishonouring of a treaty should be reprehensible, the annexation of Oudh is, as Outram observes, already an actuality and the Queen of England now has five million more subjects and an increase in revenue of more than a million pounds a year. This, we might perceive, is the payoff of Wajid Ali's failure. The question is not whether the King will abdicate, but rather will he abdicate voluntarily or by force. In order to bring sane influence to bear upon him, Outram obtains an audience with the Queen Mother, but the Begum Sahiba takes an aggressive stance, declaring that the King should resist the Company with force. She wonders why it has taken the Company ten years to decide that the King is an unworthy ruler, and why it should be so high-handed when it has always enjoyed the cooperation of the King and the warmth and hospitality of his people. (The value of good manners and genial hospitality is mentioned elsewhere in the film, by Mir and Mirza, in relation to one Mr Collins who, apparently, had no appreciation of such refinement—nor, may it be suggested, have the likes of Dalhousie and Outram.) The Begum Sahiba states unequivocally that the royal family is not to be bought; their one desire is justice.

There is then a cut to a close-up of the King's cat in its master's lap, a very effective shot in its indication of what is to follow. After the Prime Minister has reported to the King on the Begum Sahiba's meeting with the Resident, the King is pressed to raise an armed force of even a million men to resist the Company's designs. The King's response is to sing from one of his songs: "I do not know how I shall bear the pain of parting when I leave my beloved Oudh." Clearly he, along with his cat, is willing to capitulate, and he gives orders that all guns be unloaded and all soldiers be unarmed when he receives the Resident at eight the following morning, ensuring that the capitulation be a general one. (There is a quite unnecessary shot of soldiers casting their weapons on a pile.)

The encounter of King and Resident is, of course, something of an anti-climax, but it does serve to tidy up one or two details relating to the forced abdication. One excellent close shot, from the point of view of Outram and then of Weston, of the King's sorrowful face serves to underline without words the discomfort of those who are aiding in the shameless violation of a treaty; in the case of Weston we might also sense a distinct element of sympathy for the maligned monarch. There is then a melodramatic gesture when Wajid uncovers his head, to the dismay of Outram, and declares unexpectedly that he might bare his head to the Resident, but he cannot sign the treaty. The next we hear of the King is from the boy, Kalu, telling the chess players that the king has surrendered. The narrator sets the seal on Wajid's vacillating: "There was to be no fighting nor bloodshed. King Wajid had made sure of that. On February 5, 1856, Oudh would come into British hands, Wajid Ali Shah would leave Lucknow for the last time, and Lord Dalhousie would have eaten his cherry."

This then is the imperial theme of Ray's film. Running parallel to it, yet largely distinct from it, is the story on an infinitely less grand scale of the two chess players, Mir and Mirza. As the two

themes might well be presented as self-contained units, we might consider why they are presented here in tandem, as it were. After all, Mir and Mirza are not known to Wajid Ali or Outram except as part of the amorphous and anonymous "the people", and the King and the Resident are but remote and nebulous figures in the minds of the two chess players. Nevertheless, Ray is able directly, subtly and at times quite ingeniously to use the story of his gentlemen of leisure to comment on and magnify his grander theme.

The story of Mir and Mirza is more compact than the complementary theme, which is for the most part divided between the Resident, on the one hand, and the King, on the other. Mir and Mirza, however, are inseparable, and their partnership, albeit with its element of rivalry, is fundamental to the development of their narrative, the structure of which could hardly be more simple: two chess players seek somewhere to play their game without hindrance or interruption.

Their story is preceded by prayer; they are the third in the triple *namaz* sequence mentioned earlier. Together they pray, together they play. As they sit down together to start their game, however, the potential for dissension between them arises when Mirza somewhat testily has to remind Mir of one of the rules, diplomatically raising a subtle suggestion of unfair play. Then they are clearly annoyed at having to tolerate an interruption: a friend, Nandalal, has come to call, and simple courtesy requires that he be received with appropriate hospitality. The dialogue with Nandalal carries nothing of narrative consequence, but is interesting for the comment it provides on the broader context. For example, Nandalal has come to inform them of the news that the British are planning to take over Oudh and that their troops have already reached Kanpur. What would seem to be a delicate matter between Resident and King is, in fact, common knowledge. From Nandalal the chess players learn that their game has an English version—"Has the Company

taken over chess too?" is Mirza's somewhat pregnant joke—which is designed to make the game faster; one can see the likes of Outram appreciating the efficiency in this. There are references to the telegraph (which "makes bad news travel faster") and the steam engine, all of which, along with the Company's campaigns in other parts of India, have to be paid for; hence the financial value of Oudh to the Company, a fact which Mirza clearly comprehends. None of this would seem to be terribly controversial to the two gentlemen of leisure, and even when the threat of war is suggested by their visitor, Mirza is content to defer to the heroic deeds of his and Mir's great-grandfathers in the service of King Burhan-ul-Mulk, which won them the estates off which they live so comfortably today. "Maybe," muses Mirza, "some of that blood flows in our veins," a possibility that is the cause of much mirth later on.

As they prepare to play again after dinner, they are once more interrupted, this time by that perennial of pests, a wife demanding the company of her husband. The fact that Mirza can abandon someone as lovely as Shabana Azmi in favour of Mir says a lot for the power that the game of chess has over him. She makes an abortive attempt to seduce him into love-making, but he manages to hurry away from her back to his game, carrying much to his distaste the piece of gossip that Mir's wife is having an affair with another man. And while Mirza is out of the room placating his amorous yet testy wife, Mir takes the opportunity to shift the pieces and, on Mirza's return, declares "Check" with the utmost of honeyed innocence.

In their next episode, Mir arrives to find Mirza berating his domestic staff in consequence of his chessmen having gone missing, presumably stolen. There is a potential disaster here, for Mir does not have a set of his own and his proposal that they go out and buy one is met by the realization that, being Friday, the shops are all shut. Mirza sets his chess player's mind to some acute lateral thinking, and we see the two men settling

down to play with bottles and buttons and pieces of fruit instead of the 'stolen' carved ivory pieces. In desperation, contempt and anger, Mirza's wife returns the stolen booty with a fury that startles the two men, making Mirza realise that his own house is no longer a safe place in which to pursue their game. From tomorrow they must play at Mir's house.

Mir chances upon his wife with her paramour and seems to accept the excuse of the younger man that he was actually hiding from the soldiers who are going around the city press-ganging men into the service of the King against the Company. Whether Mir actually believes this story or simply wants to believe it—a wife's adultery could be such an inconvenience to one's chess programme—is left in doubt, Ray directing Saeed Jaffrey to allow for both options. Nevertheless, the mere possibility of conscription is real enough to strike fear in him, and he convinces Mirza that they should again seek a more suitable venue. It is here that Mirza sees the humour in such cowards as he and Mir being descendants of nobles who fought so valiantly for Burhan-ul-Mulk.

Just as the shehnai is playing to herald the entrance of the British Resident into the palace of the King of Oudh to facilitate the abdication, Mir and Mirza are seen on the other side of the river, away from the town and all its immediate cares, trying to find the disused mosque that Mir has determined to be the peace haven for their chess-playing. A local boy, Kalu, whose family has fled in the face of the anticipated conflict, offers his family's now empty house for their game. The boy is an interesting symbol of adventurous youth, forgoing safety with his family in order to be there to witness the arrival of the impressively arrayed invaders. Kalu, being able to prepare a hookah and willing to run to the bazaar for his visitors' lunch is engaged, for a small payment, to keep Mir and Mirza in the condition to which they are accustomed.

Of course, Kalu cannot do two things at once, and when the hookah needs to be refreshed when he is away at the bazaar

Mirza's irritation becomes plain. "How helpless we are without servants," observes Mir, stating the obvious. But Mirza's irritation does not emanate simply out of a foppish helplessness in satisfying his need for tobacco and food, nor from the strong predilection of the mosquitoes in this alfresco arena for Mirza's noble blood. On top of all of that, Mirza is losing the game, and on top of that, Mir appears to be gloating.

Mirza resorts to a vicious counter-manoeuvre against the composed and self-assured Mir in blatantly raising the issue of Mir's wife's infidelity. It is the sudden shock of Mir's humiliation that manifests the grand falling out. With an exchange of insults about each other's forebears, Mir takes up his gun and aims it at his erstwhile friend. It has the potential for a comic confrontation: Mirza is obviously frightened of what Mir might do with a gun, and fear is often a good source of humour; Mir is just as obviously uncomfortable in the position he has got himself into and is desperately trying to display some bravado. However, it is not comic; there are no smiles or the slightest element of buffoonery. It is a superbly acted scene in which the tension emanates out of the fact that the unthinkable is now chillingly possible—an idea similar to one which must have been in the minds of King Wajid and his supporters a very short time earlier. In both cases the unthinkable is brought about by the arrival of the British. It is the abrupt announcement by Kalu that the British are coming that triggers the shot fired at Mirza by his long-time friend.

There then follows an impressive sequence in which the invading force is seen marching across the screen from right to left. There are infantry and cavalry and huge armaments and supplies carried by horses, camels and elephants. It is indeed a formidable array. The march into Lucknow is inter-cut with shots of Kalu's face watching intently, both over-awed and suspicious—after all, who knows what they might do?—and the two chess rivals, now adversaries, totally unaware of the

momentous cavalcade behind them and, as always, utterly rapt in their own shared interest. Mirza is aghast that he has been shot, or, to be more precise, that the bullet has grazed a tear in the shawl wrapped around his shoulder; Mir is aghast at having done the damage. It all goes together to form an impressive sequence combining notions of the march of history, youth's eye on the future and embrace of change, and the ultimate Indian version of Nero's fiddling.

The falling out is quickly repaired. Mirza, with nothing more to his wounds than a slightly torn shawl, is offered his lunch, and Mir, standing under a tree, has been sullied by some discourteous birds. It is time for them to eat, even to play another game while they do so. As the narrator tells us, Lord Dalhousie has eaten his cherry, and for the chess players life goes on as always. After all, muses Mir, "If we can't cope with our own wives, how could we cope with the British army?" The fact is that they do cope with their wives rather well—have the women ever proved a serious impediment to their chess playing?

Shatranj Ke Khilari is an impressive film in many ways, not the least of which is the superb quality of its acting. Despite an element of woodenness in Tom Alter's Weston, the role is played with efficiency and persuasion. The lesser Indian characters are beautifully presented by Veena as the Sahiba Begum and Victor Banerjee as the Prime Minister. Amjad Khan's King Wajid is a brilliant, slightly enigmatic counterpart to Outram's description of him, and Ray gains great profit from his highly intelligent and expressive face. Richard Attenborough's Outram is vibrant and amusing, though not without the essential element of that sense of superiority that is the hallmark of the British imperialist. It is almost impossible to imagine the roles of Mir and Mirza being played better by anyone other than Saeed Jaffrey and Sanjeev Kumar.

Moreover, each of the two distinct stories that provide the film's substance is beautifully drawn, the one highly informative

as a piece of history, the other beautifully reflecting both the splendour and the decadence of a long gone way of life. Each story also contains credible characters in interesting conflicts, and the more obvious grandeur of the one does not diminish the appeal of the other. Both stories are highly entertaining. The discreteness of each story should not go without remark, for it is in the fact that either might make an acceptable short film in itself that the genius of combining the two lies, and the effect of the combination is worth considering: does either story serve to complement or magnify the other? If one story is the major one and the other serves to highlight it, then which is which? An important feature of a fine film is that it leaves its audience with questions such as these to play with long after the film has finished.

There are, nevertheless, certain blemishes that separate this splendid work from Ray's great films. Generally Ray's concern for form is meticulously realised. The overture section is both economical and adequate, and the structure of the rest of the film is enhanced by concentration of space—a few interiors in the city of Lucknow—and concentration of time, the film being contained within a period of just nine days. However, there is fat that might have been trimmed. The character of Mirza's wife is very two-dimensional and, given its limited originality, overwritten. Whereas it is important to stress the underhandedness of British principles—or lack of them—in respect of treaties, the basic moral issue in the imperial theme is also overwritten, the characters of the court particularly evidencing overlap and repetition. And while the musical and dance segments are rich and highly entertaining in themselves, they suffer from overexposure and serve to dilute what would otherwise be one of the film's strengths, its focal tightness of construction.

Four notable films have been made on the Bengal Famine: in addition to *Ashani Sanket* there are Mrinal Sen's *Baishe Sravan*

(1960) and *Akaler Sandhane* (1980) and Nabyendu Chatterjee's *Shilpi* (1993)[3]. Given the holocaust proportions of the catastrophe brought about by a foreign government indifferent to the most basic needs of the people while concerning itself predominantly with its war interests in Asia, the wonder is that so few films have been made on the subject.[4]

The famine, which caused the deaths of as many as five million people, was a man-made disaster, the result of deliberately hoarding rice as insurance for the possible needs of allied forces fighting a war against the Japanese. The callousness of the British Government in inflicting such appalling devastation on millions of helpless and innocent people is well illustrated by its leader, Churchill who, in reply to the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, warning of the inevitable deaths of millions, could only rue, with characteristic petulance, that Gandhi was not one of them.[5] It is interesting that such perverse inhumanity is not even mentioned in any of the Bengal Famine films; all of them focus on the actuality and its effects rather than the cause, and apparently see no point in attributing blame.

Ray's *Ashani Sanket* derives from a novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, on whose works too Ray had made his Apu trilogy. The film is set in the year 1943 and offers a view of Bengali rural life through the eyes of a village brahman, Gangacharan Chakravarti, and his wife, Ananga. The story of the brahman is not so much of interest in itself but more as a point of reference to broader issues. Of particular concern to

[3] There is also the second story, *Angar*, in Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972).

[4] For a discussion of *Baishe Sravan, Akaler Sandhane* and *Calcutta 71* see my *Chasing the Truth. The Films of Mrinal Sen* and *The Essential Mystery. Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema.*

[5] Shashi Tharoor, *Nehru. The Invention of India,* New Delhi, 2003, p.131. Tharoor also quotes Churchill as saying, "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion." (ibid. p.123) It would have been extremely unrealistic to expect any degree of sympathy from a government led by such a man.

Ray is the confrontation between imperialist war economics and a still pre-modern rural life, and the moral turmoil that resulted from that confrontation. The physical fact of starvation is spelt out no more than is necessary for it to be an essential background element to abnormal and somewhat unprecedented moral issues.

The title sequence is exquisitely evocative. The shots before the titles are of rural Bengal, focussing on the beauty of the countryside and highlighting such things as ponds abundant with water, lush jungle, water-lilies, the ploughing of some fields and in others masses of rich green paddy. There is a strong sense of optimism in all of this, the dominance of water and green clearly suggesting life, fertility and abundance. With the appearance of the film's title, there is a subtle, significant change of mood: afternoon has turned into evening, the wind is springing up and heavy clouds are gathering; trees are seen in silhouette against an eerie sky. Then the horizon is seen to sink lower and lower in the frame while the boundless and mysterious sky comes to dominate, although a couple of shots of rain gently falling in the jungle offer a reminder of the earlier lushness. The sinister sky gradually takes on the red of the sunset, but it is an angry red, a harsh, somewhat threatening red. The sequence is visually superb, wonderful simply to look at but disquietingly suggestive of an uneasy juxtaposition of contentment and threat. Indeed, the film is going to show innocent people becoming the victims of suffering beyond their comprehension, perpetrated by unseen, distant and impersonal forces, in an environment as beautiful as the horrors visited upon them are obscene.

The ambivalence suggested in the titles sequence hovers over the opening scene too. The opening shot is of the hand of a woman slowly emerging from beneath the surface of a pond. She is soon joined by a number of others, all appearing to take great pleasure in each other's company. When they leave the pond after bathing, they walk through a stretch of lush, green jungle. The elements of serenity here are simple and obvious:

femininity, joy and laughter; water and its ready association with cleansing and regeneration; and continuing natural growth. But into this simple serenity Ray intrudes three incongruities: one stark, one seemingly inconsequential, one horrible. The first is a formation of aeroplanes momentarily scarring the blue sky over this realm of tranquillity. The apparent incongruity is made even starker by an irony: what we should recognise as a squadron of warplanes is described by one of the women as the beautiful sight of 'flying ships'. This is the first of a number of times in the film when innocence will be pitted against experience. The second incongruity is a reference to cholera, which, as we will see, carries with it a touch of irony and will not remain an isolated allusion. The third incongruity stops the women in their tracks as they return home through the jungle. Near a kiln in a clearing close by stands a man, later to be identified as 'Scarface' Jadu, instantly repulsive due to a grotesque facial disfigurement.

In the titles and opening sequences, then, Ray has established an atmosphere of loveliness while at the same time tempering it with a hint of ominousness. It is a superb introduction to a film that gives an incisive insight into the traditional in conflict with the modern, and the director is prudent in establishing the vulnerabilities of that tradition before he allows the modern to impose itself upon it.

The most salient social feature of Hindu tradition is caste, the range of which is represented here by the introduction of the untouchable girl, Moti, who comes to visit Ananga, the wife of the brahman, Gangacharan Chakravarti. Here, in a simple meeting, Ray brings together the lowliest untouchable with the wife of a high-caste brahman. It is interesting to note that the relationship between the two women is warm and cordial; Gangacharan also greets Moti courteously. The only hint of discomfort is when Moti goes to reverentially touch Ananga's feet, and the brahman woman quickly draws away saying, "Don't

touch me now or I'll have to bathe again." Moti will appear again at the end of the film and the significance of her introduction into the film will be complete.[6] One pertinent reality for which Ray is preparing us in bringing caste into his film is that, like death, famine and hunger attack with equal virulence and without discrimination untouchable and Brahman alike.

The sense of serenity is maintained while Ray proceeds to establish notions of tradition and its anomalousness in a modern world. The first shot of Gangacharan is a long shot of the brahman coming home from the village. There are several shots like this, each one easily and pleasantly reminding us of one man's harmony with his world. But the world with which Gangacharan would seem to be in harmony is a very small one with, as we will see, a relatively short life expectancy.

Gangacharan leads the traditional life of a brahman. While many of his caste, with the advent of modernity, had come to pursue wealth-generating activities or joined the professions, Gangacharan has continued with occupations traditionally appropriate to a brahman: the foremost is the priestly vocation, but he also works as a practitioner of traditional medicine and he runs an elementary school for boys in the village. As a medical practitioner he follows the lore of ancient handbooks, prescribing their nostra, curing, we might assume, more by luck than by science. There are shots of him visiting patients and feeling pulses. On one occasion he is called to a village a few miles away which has no brahman. Cholera has broken out there and so there is a need for a *puja* or religious ritual to be performed to ward of the evils of the killer disease. Ray is meticulous in underlining medical practice as one of the major points of vulnerability in Indian tradition. The camera concentrates one

[6] It is interesting to compare the treatment by a brahman of an untouchable in orthodox north India in Ray's *Sadgati* with this more liberal attitude in Bengal.

by one the ingredients of the ritual: the offerings of flowers and food, ghee and fire, the ringing of bells and the blowing of the conch, the recitation of mantras in Sanskrit and, as Gangacharan points out, the most important part of it all, the tying of a pennant to a *neem* tree in the north-east of the village. One can only wonder what any of this could have to do with the eradication of a deadly disease, but Ray's camera very clearly shows that the villagers are indeed impressed. Almost as an incidental throwaway, Gangacharan utters a few proscriptions about drinking river water and eating stale food, and warns of the need to get rid of food on which flies have settled. He then sets off home with his bounty of, among other things, rice and dal and saris for his wife.

Throughout history the orthodox brahman lived to a very large extent off charity, the traditional belief being that one acquired virtue by serving and offering alms to brahmans (an ideal that obviously was contrived by brahmans). Gangacharan, however, is more than ready to work for what is piously offered to him, and adds the setting up of a village school to his priestly and medical work, so exposing himself, nevertheless, to further opportunities to receive the largesse of the other villagers: one man, having caught more fish than he needs, deems it worthy to give one to the brahman; another man comes to have his pulse taken and receives a nostrum for the betterment of his health along with a request to send two seers of mustard seeds; one of Gangacharan's pupils is the son of a barber, and the boy is instructed to tell his father to come and shave the teacher the next day; and a palm-tapper whom Gangacharan passes on the way promises to send him some palm juice. Thus he and his wife are able to eke out a humble yet relatively comfortable existence; however, given the changes being wrought by the forces of modernity to the nature of the traditional Bengali village, the certainty of its continuance would seem to be brittle.

The brahman, given his innate sacredness and his perceived learning, is held in high esteem by the other villagers, whom he

impresses with his knowledge of the world and its geography and politics as well as by his random offerings of Sanskrit, but well meaning as he is he is no Renaissance man. His medical knowledge is little more than quackery, his Sanskrit—we are led to suspect—is definitely limited. He does know that the soldiers of the English king are fighting the Germans and the Japanese, and that the Japanese and not the Germans, as someone has suggested, have attacked "some 'Pur' or other" which he is able to identify correctly as Singapore; however, his location of it somewhere in Medinipur district in West Bengal, not far from Puri, greatly devalues his geographical expertise. As for the World War, his view is it that it cannot last very long, as even the great battle of Kurukshetra in the epic *Mahabharata* "lasted only eighteen days". In fact, he represents a world-view that is extremely circumscribed in its vision and awareness, lacking in adaptability and ingenuity. Nor is the economics of any of them sufficient to comprehend why money can no longer buy rice.

The villagers seem content with the explanation that because of the war there are soldiers to be fed, for an army marches on its stomach. Apart from this they know virtually nothing about the war even though it is vitally affecting their food supply. Ray does not go into the imperial government's cruel decision to jeopardise the lives of millions in pursuit of a policy of hoarding for its military. His film is a human document, which would surely be spoiled by any indulgence of political polemic.

Ray introduces the reality of famine into his film subtly, very gradually and innocently, almost with a touch of naïveté.[7] When we remember what Gangacharan has to say to the man who comes to have his pulse taken, censuring him for eating rice when ill, we may note a discomfiting irony, for soon none of them will have any choice about eating rice whether they are ailing or healthy. The camera continues to offer plenty of evidence

[7] By comparison we might note the sinister, insidious introduction of famine into Mrinal Sen's *Baishe Sravan.*

that Nature is bountiful in this part of the world and that the earth is prolific, and Gangacharan makes particular note of "how lush the garden is already". It is important to appreciate this innocent unawareness of impending disaster, for it is a totally unnatural calamity, one deliberately brought about by callous men in a distant country.

We first confront the fact that all is not well with the world when Gangacharan is returning from performing his cholera sacrifice and is stopped on the road by an elderly man. There is a clear picture of sinisterness in the long shot that shows the man running after Gangacharan's cart, silhouetted against the background of the vast sky with its masses of dark, thunderous clouds. The man introduces himself as one Bhattacharjee, a fellow brahman from another village. Whereas it is relatively easy to turn away a common beggar, a brahman seeking alms is more commanding, and Gangacharan, like his wife a little later, readily gratifies the man's needs.

Cinematically Bhattacharjee is an interesting figure. His unshaven face and largely toothless mouth make him visually unattractive and his wheedling and craftiness as a sponger hardly make him likeable. Nevertheless, he is a brahman and must be respected; more important, Ray seems to be saying, he is a human being confronted by a difficulty he has no hope of overcoming. Thus Ananga displays ready pity and self-sacrifice for the old man in giving him what she has cooked for herself when he comes to their cottage to crave further charity. Part of his plea is the large family for which he is responsible, but clearly he has no thought for them while he eats Ananga's meal and enjoys a comfortable siesta on her veranda before agreeing to stay the night and partake of yet another free meal. Gangacharan is somewhat cool towards him, perceiving with some real misgiving that their charity to him is threatening their own well-being. This perception is the basis of a moral dilemma that, at the end of the film, Gangacharan will magnanimously resolve.

Bhattacharjee's appeal to Gangacharan is not simply that of a fellow brahman nor to Ananga that of a pitiable old man. His appeals are underlined by his affirmation of the sudden rise in the price of rice—in his village it is now six rupees a seer—and so he offers an important appeal to the audience as well, giving substance to the predicament in which he sees himself being caught. We are not told what the price was before, but the look of concern on Gangacharan's face is enough to persuade us that the hike is a substantial one. It will be more than six hundred percent higher by the end of the film.

The introduction of Bhattacharjee into the film is a seemingly ominous intrusion into a context of contentment and promise of plenty. The obvious lushness and fertility all about and the many close shots of flowers and insects all suggest that Nature is getting about its work as well as could be wished. On the human level there is a lovely shot of Gangacharan's school—a makeshift structure consisting of a thatched or matted roof held up by bamboo posts and open on all four sides. A point of view shot through the eyes of the teacher to the road behind the boys shows, in the mid-distance, the messenger come from Kamdevpur to ask Gangacharan to go to that village and perform the *puja* to ward off cholera; behind him, stretching into the distant background, are fertile fields. It is a lovely shot, the rustic serenity of which is underlined by the innocent naughtiness of the boys' laughter when their visitor awkwardly tries to jump over the ditch beside the road. But a blow to this sense of contentment comes in the form of a challenge to Gangacharan's understanding of the world when he visits a village shop and learns that stocks of kerosene have been exhausted. Gangacharan is mildly incredulous, remarking that he has never heard of money not buying things and declares, as he moves away, that now he is getting worried. A strong touch of irony is added by the visual nature of the scene. Structurally it is similar to the one looking through the schoolroom to the road and the fields beyond. Here

the camera looks through the shop to the road outside, to the river running along the other side of the road, and the trees and fields on the other side of the river where boys are jubilantly playing. A few seconds after Gangacharan has wondered if this odd economic situation has been caused by the war, the noise of the boys' excitement increases as they watch the warplanes flying overhead, utterly unaware that they hold the explanation for the lack of kerosene and the reason for the eventual starvation of so many of them. In this brief scene Ray continues to paint a picture of rural serenity and the abundance of nature, introduces a baffling enigma of market economics, and reminds us of the war through the joyousness of youth. It is a superbly telling scene, rich with irony, in which so much is compressed.

In time hunger and uncertainty, enhanced by an innocent ignorance of the ways of the world, will ruthlessly shake the rustic serenity that has been so carefully established. Once the price of rice reaches a certain level, a new and unfamiliar situation comes about in which the old rules can no longer apply. New rules are spontaneously and arbitrarily applied as the mob loses patience and ransacks the store of Biswas, the village rice merchant. In the commotion that follows Gangacharan tries to defend a man wrongly accused of looting and, in the process, is unceremoniously knocked to the ground. This particular shot carries immense symbolic value. A very short time ago in this world the crude manhandling of a brahman would have been unheard of. Looting is one thing, and may even be understandable, but an assault on a brahman trying to defend the guiltless frighteningly indicates the grim moral labyrinth in which this once tranquil rural world has become entangled.

This general unruliness provides a simple context for depictions of individual meanness. When Gangacharan is told of the general lack of kerosene, he is ingenuously advised to stock up on salt and rice. Of course, rice merchants are much better placed to stockpile rice for themselves than is a humble rustic brahman;

Biswas is no exception to this and many would say that he deserves the beating and abuse that he gets from desperate and hungry villagers. However, Ray wants to show that he is no isolated misanthrope, and so he has Gangacharan walk miles and miles to try to buy rice from a merchant called Ghosh. Ghosh is willing—as a matter of religious duty, it would seem—to provide one meal for one brahman, even to catch a fish for him to eat with it, but he is adamant in his refusal to go further and allow the brahman to take anything away for his wife. Gangacharan's inability to eat what is eventually cooked for him, brought about by thoughts of Ananga and her ever-readiness to make sacrifices for him, provides a telling contrast to the old Bhattacharjee who claims to be concerned for his family but enjoys without conscience whatever he can scrounge for himself. Yet it is a little discomfiting to remember that even Gangacharan responded to the plea to officiate at the cholera *puja* at Kamdevpur, to some extent driven by the promise of profit.

There are two other, more extreme, examples of the immoral excesses to which people may go in abnormal times. The first is the attempted rape of Ananga when she goes with several other women to the forest to look for tubers. Her sari gets caught on a briar, and the others go ahead as she tries to free herself. It is then that her stalker attacks her, and it is ironic that her screams cannot be heard for the warplanes flying overhead at that moment. But the planes pass and the women eventually do hear Ananga's cries, and with their sticks they attack and kill the would-be rapist and dump his bleeding body in the stream.

This outrageous attack on a brahman's wife may be viewed in the same symbolic light as the earlier attack—albeit much less severe—on Gangacharan. It might also be seen as underlining the vulnerability of women in time of extreme hardship. Significantly Ray does not show the man's face, his anonymity serving perhaps to universalise his guilt. Of course, women are raped not only in times of hardship, but the horror of the attack

on the exceptionally good Ananga mirrors with pungent suggestiveness the ruthless attack on millions of innocent people by their faceless imperialist rulers. The simple difference is that Ananga is rescued; millions of hapless and helpless Bengalis were not.

The attempted rape of Ananga also provides an interesting contrast to the sexual advantage that the grotesque 'Scarface' Jadu takes of Ananga's friend, Chutki. On the one hand it can be said that Jadu exploits her hunger for his own satisfaction, offering her rice for sexual favours, and so is contemptible[8]. On the other hand, it has to be pointed out that he is no rapist, to be gratified by any attractive woman. Since coming to this place he has had eyes only for Chutki and has made no attempt to impress his affections on any other. But it is not a matter of simple sexual gratification, for soon after her reluctant submission to Jadu she agrees to leave her husband and go away with him to the city. Her behaviour might be described as reprehensible, only justifiable if at all by the unbearable torture of hunger. But Jadu's appalling disfigurement—which some may interpret as a mark of his depravity—is enough to make Chutki's desertion of her husband explicable by the collapse of familiar values brought about by the cynical rape of a populace.

Gangacharan Chakravarti certainly stands in contrast to the excesses of meanness represented by the likes of Biswas and Ghosh, the sexual brutality of the would-be rapist and the moral frailty of Jadu. Nevertheless, he is at least a slightly flawed hero. He has no qualms in using his brahman status to sponge off others for whatever he can get, even though such cadging is legitimised by tradition, and he exploits the opportunity to perform the sacrifice at Kamdevpur for whatever he can get out of it, bargaining on the sickness and deaths of ignorant people.

[8] The *Angar* segment of Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* and his *Akaler Sandhane* both offer explicit treatment of women turning to prostitution in time of famine.

Indeed, he is not particularly well educated himself; he is literate and versed in quackery, little more, and his dependence on the charity of others is more an indication of his inadequacy than any kind of exploitation. Despite the blessed accident of his birth he is, after all, an Everyman and as such he offers a splendid ray of hope at the end of the film.

Once the famine has been established as a wreaker of havoc, and confusion works unrestrained on the darker side of human nature, we meet once again Moti, the untouchable girl. In the throes of starvation she comes back to Ananga and Gangacharan, collapsing under a tree just before she reaches their cottage. She tells of the deaths of everyone in her village and, not having the strength to eat what Ananga has given her, she too dies. Ray the realist obviates any chance that this death may be sentimentalised by having a boy hiding nearby, waiting like a vulture for her death, so that he might grab the parcel of food left for her by Ananga. This simple cinematic gesture is indeed a telling indication of the sad dissipation of humanity that has gone hand in hand with the man-made abomination that is in the process of destroying the lives of millions.

It is in this sad and somewhat ghoulish context that our rural brahman Everyman becomes the hero of the film. With the death of Moti Gangacharan is confronted starkly by the pitiable frailty of mankind, and sadly observes that as she was untouchable in life so she is in death. He then transcends the strictures of his brahman tradition and asserts the need to offer the dead Moti one last vestige of dignity. It is significant that he says, "I must do something," rather than, "I must arrange to have something done,"[9] and then asks his wife, "You don't mind, do you?"

When Gangacharan was manhandled and put to the ground at the time of the looting of Biswas's shop, that a brahman should be so treated was a sign that things had come to a

[9] Again the contrast to the brahman in *Sadgati* is striking.

gravely desperate pass. Now that a brahman is obliged to take it upon himself to dispose of the mortal remains of an untouchable, could things possibly get any worse? Yet Ray very clearly depicts Gangacharan here not as degenerate but as triumphant. There may not be rice to eat, but humanity still needs to be honoured, and Gangacharan casts aside the moribund traditions of prejudice and so elevates not only Moti but himself and Ananga too. He has struck a momentous blow for humanity in flouting an archaic and inhuman prejudice.

This simple transcendence of Gangacharan imbues him with the strength for the remarkable last moments of the film. Looking through his eyes out on to the road we see in the distance Bhattacharjee and his family coming towards him and Ananga. In answer to his wife's simple, "What is going to happen?" Gangacharan just as simply, and resolutely, says, "We'll feed ten instead of two." Ananga waits for a second before raising his ten to eleven, indicating that she is pregnant. The Bhattacharjees, now in complete silhouette, fill the frame and, as they pass and move away from the camera, continue to multiply over and over again to signify the millions of Bengalis who died in this shameful disaster. The ending is extraordinarily powerful, blending as it does Gangacharan's heroic gesture on behalf of Moti, the despair of millions and the resolute humanity of a humble rural brahman, all leavened by the wondrous yet everyday hope of regeneration offered by Ananga.

The importance of Ananga to the film cannot be understated. With her lovely face and her gentle but vibrant personality she may easily be seen as representative of the film's essential goodness. The influence she has over her husband is also significant, manifested so strongly in Gangacharan's inability to eat the meal offered to him at the Ghosh's house for thinking of his noble and self-sacrificing wife. It is also worth noting the portrayal of the women in general in this film. For the most part they are seen as a harmonious group, in contrast to the general impression

Ray gives of the men. Once the hardship has descended on them, the women work together foraging for food; the men fall angrily into dissension and mutual mistrust. While the men sit around and talk and attribute blame, the women get things done, labouring at the grindstone or devising ingenious ways of supplementing what is fast becoming a starvation diet. They dispense justice swiftly and categorically, as in their dealing with Ananga's attacker, and they maintain strong loyalty to one another in keeping such confidences as Ananga's shame after her ordeal and the moral weakness of Chutki. The girl at the Ghosh's house who watches Gangacharan trying to prepare his meal is a simple example of the practical superiority of the women over the men.

Ashani Sanket is certainly one of Satyajit Ray's finer films. Its confined focus—the immediate world of Gangacharan and Ananga—lends it a ready clarity of direction and allows it a persuasive simplicity of exposition. There is no need for narrative complexity since the cogency of the film lies in its clear basic elements: there is nothing complex or ambiguous about hunger, and the nakedness of its depiction is in itself sufficient to ensure the power of its presentation. In a context of stark and simple actuality, the characters are all victims of something which none of them understands, and Ray's immense humanism is clearly reflected in the sympathy with which he draws them. The gentle humour pervading the scene in which Gangacharan discusses with the senior men in the village the work he might do there is just one example of the loving care and superb craftsmanship with which Ray presents even the most minor of his characters. Chutki and Jadu—frail and fallen—engender pity before censure, while Bhattacharjee's sponging, though seen as an irritant to Gangacharan, is also sympathetically vindicated. Of basic importance to the film's ethical appeal is the genuine goodness of Gangacharan and Ananga; although it is a goodness that might be seen as compromised by seemingly unwarranted

concerns for caste (Ananga's unwillingness to have her feet touched in respect by the untouchable Moti and Gangacharan's reluctance for Ananga to work with low-caste people) and a readiness to exploit the charitableness of others, it is a basic human goodness, nevertheless. There is nothing sanctimonious or moralistic about them—Ananga's care for old Bhattacharjee and Gangacharan's resolve to close Moti's earthly existence with dignity both evolve very naturally from convincing characters, wonderfully drawn and exquisitely acted.

Ashani Sanket has to be a strongly realistic film, yet it offers some memorable poetic elements and, despite the severity of its subject, it is a very beautiful film, visually and morally. The film is saved from being at all polemical by there being no mention of why there is a famine, other than by a few vague references to the war. The only reference to the British government is in mention of the forces of their king being at war with Germany and Japan. It is the image of the "flying ships" that both keeps the war as a point of reference and provides the irony of a diversion provided by a ready symbol of the cause of the calamity, underlining the enormous gap between these military objects of wonder and the war they are fighting and the people over whom they fly. There is also a ready irony in the constant visual evidence of a lush and bountiful nature as the backdrop to a vast and genocidal famine. Perhaps the one serious weakness with the film is the understatement of the havoc wrought by the famine. Indeed, one is inclined to wonder at the unimaginative way in which the constant rise in the price of rice is presented simply by numbers on title cards. The cards are a too simple means to an end, carrying no artistic value at all.[10]

It has been suggested that the film is too beautiful for its subject.[11] Presumably the pervasive natural beauty and the

[10] A similar cheapness of communication may be noted in the overuse of newspaper headlines in several of Mrinal Sen's films.

[11] Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, p. 112.

attractiveness of some of the women, especially Ananga, are stumbling blocks for those who hold this view. There is no good reason why Ananga should not be beautiful. The simple fact is that Babita plays the role exceptionally well and there is no tension whatever between her performance and her looks; indeed, her lovely face on many occasions compliments her performance wonderfully well. However, although a director can make choices in regard to casting, there is little room for choice as far as setting is concerned. If Bengal is lush and green, then that is how it should be presented. There would have been no good purpose served by setting the film in some desert region to make its appearance more pertinent to the harshness of famine, for the famine in this case is not a natural one but one deliberately contrived by men. Vital to the film's point is the profoundly disturbing irony in the fact of millions of people dying of starvation amidst such widespread, beauteous plenty. The beauty of *Ashani Sanket* might perhaps be seen as incongruous in a certain framework of perception, but it is not cinematically inappropriate.

There has also been the criticism that the film is remote from its own major concern, the famine. A final title card informs us that some five million people died in this man-made disaster, but Ray's film shows virtually nothing of such widespread suffering. However, to assert a tension between the title card and the film itself would betray a misunderstanding of Ray's intention and achievement which is, despite the magnitude of its context, deliberately microcosmic. The title card is dispensable; it is not a necessary conclusion to a film *about* the Bengal Famine but a footnote to a film about a change in the mind of a man—a depiction, indeed, of a challenge to tradition—*set in the context of* the Bengal Famine.

It is difficult for a feature film to be good history, even if its filmmaker wants it to be. The confinement to an approximately two-hour presentation is bound to affect the material by an exceptionally rigid selectivity and narrative bias. Good history is

probably best left as an academic discipline, though undoubtedly history is often treated well as documentary. Satyajit Ray is first and foremost an artist, who makes no pretence to be anything else. His purpose in creating a feature film is to present some aspect of the human condition, either invented as fiction or adapted from history; as the latter, it is grounded in fact and dressed in whatever garb the actual may suggest though not necessarily prescribe. Attenborough's *Gandhi* or Ketan Mehta's *Sardar,* for example, purport to be history on celluloid and as such assume the responsibility to dwell as far as possible in the realm of fact. Ray's 'history' films are not in the same category, nor were they intended to be. *Shatranj Ke Khilari, Ashani Sanket* and, although treated in another chapter, *Ghare Baire* are films set in a particular period in which certain 'historical' circumstances prevailed; what Ray has done is to interpret some of those circumstances in the development of his own drama. The notion of change, always a notion of interest to the student of history, is given prominence in both the films discussed in this chapter. In *Shatranj Ke Khilari* the winds of change blow ruthlessly, consequent as they are upon the wielding of power over a subject people by an alien, self-interested, imperialist force; in *Ashani Sanket* they blow more subtly, taking the form of challenges to the traditional values that have hitherto given buoyancy to Gangacharan's life. In *Shatranj Ke Khilari* Ray recreates known historical characters and in that film is bound at least to some extent by the principles to which the historian defers, but in *Ashani Sanket,* as well as *Ghare Baire,* his characters are all fictitious, albeit undeniably plausible. *Ashani Sanket* similarly presents the challenges of a particular time, although it contains considerably more significant references to historical actuality. However, it offers nothing approaching an historical argument such as is germane to the narrative structure of *Shatranj Ke Khilari.* Ray's interest is in certain historical events and the human dramas that are played out through them rather than in history as such.

9 Cinema for the Young: *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne, Hirak Rajar Deshe, Sonar Kella, Jay Baba Felunath*

Satyajit Ray made four films for young people. They can hardly be called 'children's films' in the way in which the term might generally be employed, for they are in no way childish in any particular appeal nor do they exclude adults. While the rest of Ray's films were made obviously for an adult audience, the four films for the young are for an audience of any age. In dealing with child actors, it is said, Ray was never patronising; he directed them as he would direct adult actors, recognising, of course, their individual needs and potentialities. He took a similar approach to a young audience. The four films for the young do not treat their intended audiences as special, nor do they take advantage of their immaturity to get away with what an adult audience would not accept. Ray never saw young people as gullible; to him, their innocence was something to be treated with respect, something that had to be nurtured, not exploited.

The four films might conveniently be looked at as two pairs: *Hirak Rajar Deshe* ("The Kingdom of Diamonds", 1980) is a sequel to *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* ("The Adventures of Goopy

and Bagha", 1968), while *Sonar Kella* ("The Golden Fortress", 1974) and *Jay Baba Felunath* ("The Elephant God", 1978) are based on two of Ray's own stories about the adventures of the private detective, Felunath Mitter.

Whatever might be written about the brilliance of the Apu trilogy or the sublime beauty of *Charulata*, for example, it would not be very far from the truth to suggest that were Satyajit Ray's films put to a popularity poll in Kolkata, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* would probably win. The film, now more than thirty years old, is one of the most loved products of Bengali culture amongst people of all ages. Of course, what is popular is not necessarily good, and there would be few if any thinking critics who would put *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* in the same class as the Apu films or *Charulata*.[1]

Of the four films for young people *Goopy and Bagha* is the most obviously juvenile, founded unashamedly as it is in the realm of fantasy and couched in magic and make-believe. It is a grand endeavour to give cinematic life to the children's storybook with its tales of wonder and imagination and its appealing, often fascinating, illustrations. While the film is replete with hocus-pocus and abracadabra, it also makes a creditable endeavour to offer its young viewers food for thought on a number of things that ought to matter in their lives – hence its appeal to more mature audiences as well.

The opening section of the film introduces to us Gopinath—or Goopy—Gyne, a rustic simpleton whose greatest joy in life is to sing. This might be seen as an admirable value, likely to endear him to many, except that he cannot sing in tune and the timbre of his voice is hardly blessed with musical potential. Duped by a group of village elders somewhat less simple than he, Goopy goes early one morning to sing outside the king's palace, rudely waking him and so causing himself to be

[1] I would argue that it is not the best of the four children's films, either; the Felunath films are far superior.

ignominiously drummed out of the village on the back of a donkey, never to return. In the forest he encounters another loner, a drummer who also has been turned out of his village, and in a sequence of theatrical clowning, Goopy becomes the companion of Bagha, another social reject.

The opening section of the film is set in the real world, where the sensitive have dreams that are crushed by the insensitive; the rest of the film is firmly entrenched in storybook-land, where a dream may bring the insensitive into submission. Indeed, one might wonder about the degree of reality in the 'real' world as it is depicted in this film, for its presentation serves not as a contrast to what is to come but as an easy introduction to it. A village simpleton running about with a newly acquired, formerly unwanted *tanpura*[2] and singing horribly out of tune to the elderly men of the village is not likely to be a frequent occurrence in Bengali rural life, and while the group of elderly men bear some resemblance to those we have already met in *Pather Panchali* and the *Postmaster* segment of *Tin Kanya,* they take on here, in context with Goopy, an element of caricature. There is already quite a sense of storybook, and when the camera intrudes into the palace of the king whom Goopy is being so naïve as to wake up with his 'song', we meet the first of a host of stock storybook characters.

By now the transition from the mundane to fantasy is becoming evident, and is fully effected after the two central characters have met one another. Their meeting is in a forest, and before very long they are exposed to danger, a condition that will become more and more frequent for them as the film progresses. On this occasion they suddenly find themselves in perilous proximity to a tiger, but fortunately for them the beast, seemingly lost in thought, would appear to have no interest in them. Their safety is then underlined by the appearance of the

[2] A stringed instrument to facilitate playing or singing in tune.

King of the Ghosts who submits them to an amazing display of fantasy before offering to bring them under his aegis and granting them three boons. The display is a lengthy piece of dance, mime and special effects, involving the spirits of the forest, past Indian rulers both native and foreign, and Indian people. The human elements are comic caricatures whose basic purpose, it would seem, is to establish the notion of conflict, as all they seem to do is to fight with one another and among themselves. All of this is a playful indication of what is to come, for the substance of the rest of the film is largely based on disputation between rulers and conflict between rulers and ruled. Nevertheless, the sequence is too long, especially in black and white; in colour it might not have seemed so repetitious and drawn out as the caricatures would have carried greater visual interest. Right at this moment the audience might be forgiven for feeling a little bemused at what it is all about, but would be in no doubt that the fantasy dimension has been established.

Once the bedazzlement of light and sound and the ballet of extravagant characters are over, the King of the Ghosts bestows his protective authority on our two rejected simpletons. One might well wonder why he chooses them as the recipients of the generous boons he has to offer; that wonder may be satisfied by the end of the film, but for the moment the fact that he does choose them should appear to suggest something significant about these two bumpkins that we may not have considered so far: that is, it would seem likely that those who scorned Goopy and Bagha and cast them out had been blind to something of quality in them. What that is should become apparent as their extraordinary journey proceeds.

The nature of the boons is of Goopy and Bagha's own choosing. Being poor men it is natural that their first wish should be for food and clothing; their second desire is to be able to go to faraway places; and the third is to be able to make people happy with their music. There is a progression here from basic need

through personal growth to service of humanity, and indeed the wish for the last boon is particularly touching in the light of how they got into this strange predicament in the first place. We should also note the magical procedure for the invocation of the boons, a formula that underlines the importance of cooperation and mutual dependence. The name of the wished for object or place must be expressed and then two hands must clap – one of Goopy's and one of Bagha's. While one might be critical of the empty ethic in getting something for nothing, we will come to see that what is of importance here is not the enjoyment of the boons so much as the ways in which they can be used for the good of others.

The fantasy sequence that concludes with the beneficence of the King of the Ghosts cuts to a shot of Goopy and Bagha asleep on the ground. Goopy wakes up, as though from a dream, and sees immediately one of the magic shoes that are indispensable to effecting the second of the boons. And so it was not a dream, and as Goopy gets up to greet the new day he is moved to sing; a little later his fetching voice is complimented by Bagha, who is now a more than competent drummer, all as the King of the Ghosts had decreed it would be. The sweet and simple song is set against a bucolic background that lends a special loveliness to the sequence, enough to convince the viewer that the third boon is a sure one. But the cry of an empty stomach cannot be quelled by even the loveliest of songs, and so the first boon is invoked and almost immediately an extravagant meal, set on the finest of plates, appears on cloths on the ground nearby. There is even a dog to throw the leftovers to. However, once satisfaction is replete, dissatisfaction sets in and we are given a slight indication of the truism, 'the more you have, the more you want'. Bagha wonders aloud about the value of having such fine food if they do not have a house in which to eat it. A house is what they should have asked for. It is in this context of incipient cupidity that the remaining boon is put to the test.

A palanquin bearing a singer, along with a small retinue, is passing by in the near distance, and it is learnt that they are going to a place called Shundi where the king is to hold a contest to find the finest singer. As he demonstrates amazing feats of vocal athleticism in his palanquin, this particular candidate is unwilling to talk, and the members of his train are too busy keeping up to divulge more than the barest details. It does not really matter, as Goopy and Bagha have a sure and easy way of reaching Shundi, winning the contest by virtue of their third boon and having a palace to live in after each of them has married a princess, so fulfilling Bagha's recently grumbled wish. Getting there has its problems, for wish-fulfilment technology needs to be treated with precision and the destination must be accurately factored in to the process. After shivering in snow and sweltering in desert sands, they get the name right and there is a cut, but not yet to Shundi.

The cut is to the rival kingdom of Halla and from now on the focus will alternate between here and Shundi. The film's interest cannot be contained by either place until the conflict between the two kingdoms has been resolved, while the film's comedy will now be buoyed by the drama emanating out of this conflict. In deference to this new formal direction the joyous optimism previously established must be offset by the reality of its opposite, the shadowiness of which is immediately signified by the preponderance of dark hues in the citadel of Halla and the sinister music accompanying the initial shots. Even in storybooks – indeed, *especially* in storybooks – good cannot always exist in its own right, untried and unchallenged, but needs to assert itself over the various and many forces of wickedness. Halla is confirmed as a symbol of the darker powers by the interview between the kingdom's Prime Minister and one if his spies, just returned from Shundi. The Prime Minister is delighted to learn that Shundi has no military force or any means of defence; thus, it is easy to guess his designs and so fear for the safety of Shundi

and our two charmed heroes. The more idealistic viewers may take heart from a further source of the Prime Minister's amusement, the answer to his question concerning what they do have instead of soldiers and weapons and cavalry beasts; the spy informs him that they have "peace, happiness and laughter; birds and flowers and crops in the fields." While the philistine politician scoffs at such frippery, it is clear to the audience that the inevitable conflict between the goodies and the baddies will take on more than a nominally moral dimension.

There is a cut back to Goopy and Bagha in the midst of a vast field of plenty, the "crops in the fields," suggesting the outskirts of the kingdom of Shundi. A lone flute-player directs them by gesture to the town, and the camera takes some rich moments to establish that the market-place is busy, crowded and seemingly prosperous, that the many people are engaged in communication with one another in pairs or in groups, that smiles are to be seen on nearly all the faces and, to add enigma to the already exotic, that words are not being used. Friendliness pervades, nevertheless, and the traditional value of hospitality is shown to Goopy and Bagha in being set on their way to the palace with a spontaneous gift of fruit and the generous applause of some boys for a brief tattoo from Bagha's drum. There is a shot of the palace set into the side of a mountain, and Goopy and Bagha—and, presumably, the audience—are suitably impressed.

Back in Halla, in one of the gloomy halls of the grim palace, the Prime Minister is now engaged with Barfi, the royal magician, as the leader's dark designs on Shundi are starting to take shape. The previous instrument of magic, the King of the Ghosts, was direct, confident and assuring in his beneficence to Goopy and Bagha; Barfi, while bearing a slight visual resemblance to the traditional Merlin stereotype, is seen to be a bumbling buffoon in his service of the Prime Minister of Halla. The indications are that whatever the strengths of Shundi might be, Halla might well possess the seeds of its own defeat.

We then cut back to Shundi as Goopy and Bagha enter the palace, and there is a striking visual contrast to Halla. The most salient feature of Shundi's palace is its brightness with white the predominant colour. In a resplendent hall musicians from far and wide, Goopy and Bagha among them, are seated around the walls. A gentle and beaming king enters and, without a word, directs the contest to start. In turn the singers perform; some of the concert is comic, much of it is at least musical, and all of it is sufficient to put the king to sleep. Thus the stage is set for the impact of Goopy and Bagha, whose innate lack of musical talent is now immaterial given the third boon of the King of the Ghosts. However, the important thing here is not the relative value of individual musical talent but rather the universally persuasive power of music, a power, we shall see, which will embrace even the philistines of Halla.

The unsurprising victory of Goopy and Bagha in the king's contest sets them at the centre of the tension between the two rival kingdoms. Having won the confidence of the king and enjoyed his unstinting generosity, not the least element of which is his promise of his daughter's hand in marriage (to which of the two is left unspecified), Goopy and Bagha offer to take themselves to Halla as emissaries of peace. In the meantime Halla is preparing for war.

Of course, no one is totally wicked—or at least it is nice to have young minds believe that. The inept belligerence of Halla is inflected by the eccentric characters of its leaders—the king (who bears a remarkable resemblance to the King of Shundi), the prime minister, the magician and the gourmandising general—who provide the stuff of comedy in much the same vein as Hitler and his henchmen feed the hilarity of Chaplin in *The Great Dictator.* Ray's underlying moral principle in dealing with the dark side of the dispute is that it is better to laugh at wickedness than to fear it. And so the general cannot evoke any response from his army save for an occasional belch from a

camel; the machinations of the prime minister would seem to depend on the spells of the capricious magician; and the king, as it transpires, is indeed the brother of the king of Shundi and is a brutal tyrant only under periodic doses of one of Barfi's concoctions – without which, we may assume, he is potentially as good as his gentle brother in Shundi. Therefore, while Halla may cruelly exploit its own people and hold in terror even its foreign diplomats, there appear to be sizeable chinks in the armour of its own tyranny.

Moreover, none of Halla's mischief can be a match for the power of song. From their initial appearance in Halla, Goopy and Bagha have the court in turmoil as their music finds out several Achilles heels, not the least significant being that of the king. However, there is an element of ambivalence in their presence, for while their songs may have the power to melt the coldest of hearts, their essential mortality makes them susceptible to the wiles of their antagonists. This vulnerability is indicated at the outset in their unwitting inclusion in a parade of tax evaders about to be executed. And it may be said of them as of their antagonists that they too hold the potential of their own destruction. To activate the power of their boons there is a prescribed procedure; to be transported somewhere, for example, they must have the magic shoes with them. Being surprised as they sleep by the king's soldiers, they are taken into the dungeons of Halla leaving behind them the one sure means of their escape.

As the drama proceeds, there are moments of tension when the powers of darkness appear to be invincible, but eventually the smells of Goopy and Bagha's accustomed feast beguile their jailer and enable their escape. After retrieving the magic slipper they bring down manna from heaven in the form of pots of sweets for the ill-used army of Halla, manage to appropriate Barfi's concoction that will restore speech to the people of Shundi and, in all, set this part of the world aright. The two royal brothers are reunited and each provides a princess to fulfil the

dreams of Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne who, we may be tempted to believe, go on to live happily ever after.

That *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* remains one of the most enduringly popular films of the Indian art cinema can hardly be disputed. However, being immensely popular does not necessarily mean that it is immensely good. Therefore, if Ray is to be critically appreciated fully, it is important that some reasons for this popularity be looked for. Popularity can be greatly subjective, and determining people's reasons for liking something might well be unrevealing of anything of critical interest. The best that can be done is to assert what one recognises as the artistic strengths of the film and assume—perhaps with monumental naïveté—that the legion of the film's admirers recognise them as strengths too.

The most obvious reason for the popularity of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* is its entertainment value. In exploiting a well-established appeal, Ray takes a formula tried and tested in literature and employs it in the making of a film, using the stock ingredients of children's storybooks from which to create his work. There is a side to be taken, for the story is enacted by both goodies and baddies and, as the goodies always win, one is naturally on their side. Thus, the film invites engagement from its audience and provides the opportunity for emotional involvement and empathy in its development. The chance to engage with Goopy is offered early in the film when we feel some pity for him in being cast out of his village, while the king who drives him into exile may easily be seen as a precursor to the prime minister of Halla who, later on, emerges as the epitome of the baddies. The audience's positive emotions develop as the partnership of Goopy and Bagha develops, and even more so when it takes on the service of the King of Shundi.

As well as being the goodies, Goopy and Bagha must also be appealing in their own right, and again their attraction comprises stock elements. They are senior to the children for whom they

were created, but still able to be described as young and pleasant enough to look at. Like most of the younger members of their audience they find themselves from time to time in conflict with authority figures. Generally storybooks dwell little if at all in shades of grey; the good and the bad, the foolish and the clever, the kindly and the nasty are all presented in unmistakable form. Similarly Ray presents his various characters for immediacy of recognition. The storybook element of fantasy—entailing dreamy romance, amazing adventures and the accessibility of magic for the convenience of both noble and delinquent—is prominent in the film, appealing, it might be hoped, to the young person's readiness to marvel. And finally there is the indispensable streak of comedy to keep spirits high. The jokes are all stock storybook ones: the natural clowning of Goopy and Bagha, the funny side of fear, the gentle touches of the absurd, the lampooning of bullies and the bumbling of those who would claim to be clever.

There is, however, little to challenge the more active juvenile mind, which, given such narrative structure and conventional presentation as we have here, is more closely guided than challenged to question. While there is much that might impress, there is little to wonder about as answers and 'right' attitudes are largely pre-packaged. The marvel of magic will certainly impress, but it still remains a cheap narrative convenience.

Nevertheless, there is a lot of value for children to take from this film. Many of them will be able to judge that those who bully and reject Goopy in the early part of the film behave unfairly and cruelly. They may also realise that people in authority may be important but they can also be self-interested, intolerant and unduly harsh. This point is reinforced as the film progresses and the ugly warts of the administration of Halla are candidly revealed. Notwithstanding the underlying mood of burlesque, a strong anti-violence sentiment is expressed. In the dialogue it is reported that the Kingdom of Shundi has no military defences

but cherishes rather the human values of prosperity and contentment, and later there is direct reference to the futility of war and its inability to achieve anything good. It would seem that the beasts are more insightful than the General when, in an endeavour to put his forces on parade, the camels refuse to get to their feet. And young people will be quick to judge a regime that uses chemical concoctions to rob a people of their power of speech. Although the executioner is presented as a figure of absurdity, the cruelty of political exploitation is made abundantly clear.

Finally, it is worth underlining the obvious: Goopy and Bagha are a partnership and one may prosper only with the collaboration of the other. That there is no scope for personal aggrandisement is made clear by the King of the Ghosts in bestowing the boons: nothing will be achieved without a clap of two hands—one of Goopy's and one of Bagha's. The simple message in this—that the hands of two are better than the hands of one—suggests to a young audience the value of teamwork and cooperation. In all their adventures they are obliged to work as a team, and all they achieve is won together. The converse of this strength is seen in the petty internecine conflicts that colour the administration of Halla.

When Ray lets us meet up with Goopy and Bagha again some ten years later, they are residents of the Shundi royal palace as sons-in-law of the king. Goopy doesn't look to have changed much, but palace life would seem to have agreed rather too well with Bagha, who is obviously fatter faced and, seemingly, ten years older, yet with the same mischievous eyes and ready smile. However, notwithstanding the twists and turns of time, much abides from where we left off a decade earlier. The opening title cards are shown in alternation with couplets of a Goopy and Bagha song which serves as *The story so far . . .* in serials, telling us that they are now the sons-in-law of kings—of Shundi and Halla—and have been living a life of comfort in the palace

of Shundi for the past ten years. The song also acknowledges that the King of the Ghosts changed their lives and reminds us of the three boons he granted them. The song highlights the goodness of the king of Shundi and points out how well loved he is by his subjects. At first this might appear to be merely formal, passing praise of their noble patron, but those who bear it in mind will mark a significant contrast between this good king and the king of Hirak, just as there was a significant contrast between two kings in the previous film. Finally, the song offers a fine lesson to its younger and not so young listeners, evoking their sense of wonder with the promise of so much that is to be seen in the world and, therefore, so much to learn.

However, there are also changes, some even more notable than the increase in Bagha's jowls. The most obvious one is the presentation of this storybook in brilliant, often gorgeous, colour, which not only enhances, for better or worse (the question of preference in regard to colour and black and white is largely a subjective one), those aspects of the film that may be described, albeit loosely, as realistic, but it also lends a lavishness to the work that visually distinguishes it greatly from *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne.* Despite this, it must be admitted that so much of the wonder that might have been relished in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* has been pre-empted by its predecessor; this is simply an unfortunate reality of sequels.

The most important and, perhaps, controversial difference between the two films lies in the fabulist nature of the former taking on a strong element of political satire in the latter. While the universalism of the moral teaching of the previous film characterises that of the second, we might also note in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* the presence of a particular frame of reference, that being the recently lifted state of emergency imposed on India by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, after her suspension of democracy in 1975. It is, however, a significant strength of the film that this particular reference is not essential to its enjoyment.

The initial plot dynamic emanates out of something new to the experience of Goopy and Bagha – boredom. The opening scene sees them lolling about in palatial opulence with nothing more demanding to attend to than eating grapes. The strain of it all has become too much and Bagha is constrained to confess to Goopy that the novelty has worn off and it is time for another adventure. Goopy agrees and fetches the magic slippers, unused now for ten long years, that will take them to wherever they wish to go. The obvious sign of the times is the dust and cobwebs that now adorn this wonder footwear and which cause a momentary anxiety about whether it will still have its previous potency. As though reading their minds the king enters to tell them that he has been invited to the anniversary celebrations of the kingdom of Hirak, famous for its diamond mines,[3] but given his advancing age he intends to send them as his representatives.

There is a cut to a hall of state in the palace of Hirak where the king is flattering his ministers and rewarding them lavishly with some of the wealth of his kingdom—a diamond necklace for each. Despite the darkness of his setting—at least in comparison to what we have just seen of the palace of Shundi—the initial impression is of a jovial and beneficent king. However, in the person of the royal scientist, there is a reminder of the wayward king of Halla in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. Like the capricious magician in the previous film he appears more as a nutty eccentric than a Merlinesque misanthrope, especially in his invention of paper flowers with an authentic perfume guaranteed to last six months, but we begin to feel uncomfortable about him - as well as about the king, his patron – when we learn that he is engaged in the development of a brain-washing programme. Further aversion to the king is prompted by the appearance of three appellants to the justice of their monarch.

These three simple appeals present a very clear picture of the nature of the government of Hirak. Recalling the famine-

[3] *Hirak* means 'diamond'.

producing methods of revenue collection by the agents of the British East India Company under the Permanent Settlement,[4] a farmer complains that, given the meagreness of his holding and the fact that he must feed himself and his family as well as somehow stave off the money-lender, they would all starve if he were to pay the special tax demanded by the king for the coming state celebrations. A worker from the mines complains about the harshness of working conditions and the constant beatings in the interest of production efficiency meted out to the miners by the soldiers appointed to watch over them. (The urgency here, we have already learned, lies in the fact that the king intends to honour all of his visitors to the state celebrations by presenting them with diamonds.) The worker also mentions insufficient food, toxic air and curtailed life expectancy. Finally, bringing the tale of popular woe onto a more familiar stage, a singer appeals against his apprehension by the soldiers for singing songs with 'mistaken' lyrics. As we bear in mind the power of song claimed by Goopy and Bagha, the singer appeals against the unnaturalness of being forbidden to sing. Innocently he presents his song, asserting as Goopy and Bagha have done and will do again, that the world is full of wonders; hence he marvels that the good live in penury and squalor while the wicked live in opulence or, specifically, 'sit on thrones'; those who harvest plenty have no food; and those who bring diamonds from the earth do not have even pennies.

The king, like so many governments in our own times, is impervious to these appeals, maintaining an adamant indifference to the plight of the poor. Recalling the ancient Indian ascription of divinity to the king, he argues the moral platitude that it is better to starve than not to pay the king his dues.[5] Anyway, a good whipping never did anyone any harm and a full stomach

[4] Enacted by Lord Cornwallis in 1793.

[5] Ancient authorities such as Manu (*The Laws*) and Kautilya (*Arthashastra*) would no doubt agree.

is a sure way to become overweight. The court poet is called upon to compose verses telling the people what they should know, for the justification of literature lies in serving the interests of the state. And so the appellants are dismissed and, for their audacity in questioning the king's beneficence, are sent to the laboratory so that the scientist may wash their brains with the profound words of the court poet.

In anticipation of the imminent celebrations the king orders the soldiers to remove all signs of poverty from the vicinity of the public thoroughfares[6] and, a little later, a chillingly realistic scene will show helpless people being evicted from a makeshift tent settlement and their few humble belongings put to the torch. The king then, with the aid of his court astrologer,[7] determines a time for the unveiling of a giant statue of himself, for tyrants throughout history have been very attentive to their perceived need of ego propagation. Finally, in the manner of textbook authoritarianism, the king declares education to be a dangerous thing in that it enables people to question and to think for themselves, and so the kingdom's one little school is to be closed forthwith and a general burning of books is enacted. We might remember that censorship was a major bulwark of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, but we should also remember that it continues to intimidate artists and intellectuals under ostensibly liberal regimes.[8]

[6] The allusion to Sanjay Gandhi's notorious slum clearance programme will be obvious to many.

[7] Mrs Gandhi had her personal astrologer whom she consulted on all sorts of matters, including many which impinged on the lives of millions.

[8] Endeavours to rewrite history and to stack such bodies as the Indian Council for Educational Research with sympathetic nonentities, for example, will be remembered as major blemishes of government under the BJP in the late nineties and until its electoral defeat in 2004. During that time right wing fanatics have also been responsible for vandalising some of M. F. Hussein's paintings, the damage done to cinema halls over the showing of Deepa Mehta's *Water,* and the destructive mayhem wrought at the Bhandarke Institute in Pune.

This scene runs for twenty minutes and it is too much. The dialogue is direct and entertaining and the acting is spirited; there is variety in focus as a number of different characters are highlighted and the subject matter is well sustained through this variety. However, the setting, as visually interesting as it is to start with, loses its panache to the dominance of dialogue, and the clearly defined space starts to create a sense of confinement which, after fifteen minutes or so, gives way to tedium. It is, then, a breath of fresh air in more ways than one when the cut is made to an outdoor scene.

The education minister and his retinue of flunkeys are seen heading towards the little outdoor school where the teacher, Udayan, is giving a lesson from the classical text *Hitopadesha*[9] about the enormity of a wicked king. Those who consider the film to be over-didactic might claim the coincidence here to be obviously contrived, but it can also be said to be an example of simple cinema economics. The lesson does not get very far before it is interrupted by the minister of the crown who stupidly challenges the worth of anyone but the king to impart useful knowledge, and allows the court poet—who in our times would be employed devising jingles in an advertising agency—to propound such slogans as "Knowledge is unlimited so it is useless to seek it" and "He who is learned dies of hunger". Indeed, several slogans denouncing learning are spouted by the minister who orders Udayan and then his class to repeat them, so keeping alive the notion of brainwashing introduced in the previous scene and intimating its further association with Udayan and his students. The constant repetition of a slogan may make its message seem acceptable even when it is highly questionable or even downright untrue; however, it is a well known universal political maxim that if a lie is repeated often enough it will

[9] The title means literally 'valuable or beneficial advice or teaching'. It is a collection of didactic fables composed by one Narayana, whose home may have been in Bengal, sometime late in the fourteenth century.

assume the status of truth. Many will remember that slogans, or short-cut ideas, were displayed on billboards in large numbers throughout India during the Emergency.

As he repeats the slogans that are anathema to him, Udayan's voice is dull and his face is pained. He recognises that for the moment his hands are tied, yet his equanimity is maintained even when the minister happily gives the students a permanent holiday, declaring the school to be closed for good. Nevertheless, the minister's victory appears all too easy, and the chance to give some interesting dramatic substance to the incipience of the counter-movement that does indeed, emerge a little later—albeit piecemeal and diluted by Goopy and Bagha's lengthy songs—is missed. A close-up of each boy's face in turn as they assure Udayan that they will not forget what he has taught them carries little meaning after the first three or four; after the thirteenth or fourteenth has been shown, the sequence has become nothing more than a picture gallery. As they part Udayan's noble injunction to keep faith in themselves and his brave assurance that the school would one day re-open bear nothing climactic nor do his words offer any sense of crisis; rather they come across as incidental dialogue and so minimise what might have been the importance of the counter-movement led by Udayan throughout the remainder of the film. There is, however, an ominous shadow cast by Udayan's encounter with the now brainwashed farmer, blatantly reciting his newly acquired propaganda. The teacher goes home to find the soldiers wreaking havoc in villagers' homes and burning whatever books they can lay their hands on. A futile physical struggle leads him to flee to a hideaway in the hills.

By now the songs of Goopy and Bagha are becoming rather tedious. They are lengthy and have little musical variation to them. The repetition of the lyrics allows for the message to be driven home, but at the cost of spontaneity. The sequence showing Goopy and Bagha's travels before reaching Hirak illustrates how

the songs can be overused. Their appearance in a bucolic setting is visually appealing, as are the various stages of their song—the forest, the seaside, the distant snow-covered Himalayas. As Goopy and Bagha sing of nature's joys and a pervasive happiness—an irony, given the now established iniquity of the king of Hirak, that might have been more profitably exploited—and declare their intention to fill the world with music, we might appreciate the contrast between the majesty of nature and the meanness of the kingdom of Hirak.

Again, in the unlikely but intriguing encounter of Goopy and Bagha with Udayan and the schoolteacher's summarily apprising them of the oppression under which the people of Hirak are suffering, Ray avoids grasping the dramatic potential offered here, choosing instead to continue to foreground the well established entertainment potential of Goopy and Bagha, which by now is starting to wear very thin. Far from bringing about a genuine conflict between good and evil, the incipient resistance movement, suggested rather than represented by Udayan, is treated merely incidentally. The assault on the minister's hat and that on the nose of the king's statue by boys' slingshots are endeavours to keep alive the idea of resistance, while the king's ongoing obsession with the fugitive Udayan and the threat he poses to his rule does serve to keep Udayan in the mind of the audience despite his virtually token appearances on the screen.[10]

There is cinematic delight in the visual richness of the scenes depicting the grand procession of notables, with Goopy and Bagha dressed splendidly and mounted on an elephant, the king's welcoming his guests and presenting each with a diamond ring, along with another lengthy song to much the same tune by Goopy and Bagha, and the ceremony of unveiling the statue

[10] During the Emergency the vast numbers perceived to be threats to the state of Indira Gandhi were simply detained indefinitely under summary procedures. Many of them died during their incarceration.

of the king, which is most unceremoniously besmirched by a small boy's well aimed slingshot.[11] It is all simple entertainment, with no claim to be anything else, and may rightly be enjoyed as such. There is an element of grimness in the subsequent scene in which Goopy and Bagha, led by the king, visit a diamond mine, and even their levity is not enough to detract from the serious indication of hypocrisy in the king's empty rhetoric about the paramount value of the people. One may readily wonder how many despots have uttered such slogans while committing extremes of oppression. The characteristic cant is made plain by the display of post-brainwashing behaviour by the workers as the scene ends.

One of the weakest parts of the film follows. Bagha reveals a note he has received telling him and Goopy to go to the northern forest when they see a signal from a flaming torch. The king's truly paranoid anxiety about Udayan leads him to order an all night vigil in the hope of trapping his enemy. Ray employs far more time than is necessary in showing the acutely apprehensive king and his ministers—as well as Goopy and Bagha—trying to stay awake. There is very little narrative point to this sequence nor is there anything at all amusing about it. Some degree of tension might have arisen from the king's intercepting Udayan's signal, although we know that Goopy and Bagha, who also have received the signal, can reach the appointed rendezvous in a flash.

Goopy and Bagha are directed by Udayan to buy the support of the soldiers, declaring with one of the most ironic lines in Indian cinema, "All the government servants in this country take bribes." Udayan assures them of a general mobilisation just waiting to jump into action, although we have been shown nothing of it. Udayan is not reassured by Goopy's claim that

[11] In both slingshot assaults there is comic reminiscence of the much more seriously intended throwing of the stone at Surya's house by a small boy at the end of Shyam Benegal's *Ankur*.

they have the power to stop wars (obviously referring to their triumph against the king of Halla in the previous film) declaring that this is a war that has to be waged. So Goopy and Bagha must employ their extraordinary talents to loot the royal treasury in order to suborn the royal army.

The scenes in the treasury offer some amusement, although by this stage the comedy, like the songs, has worn thin. There is, however, one very funny moment, brilliantly underplayed by Robi Ghosh, in which Bagha comes to learn that there is yet another sentry protecting the chest, directing his eyes for Goopy's benefit to a live tiger.[12] The mirth soon dissipates, however, as does any element of tension as we have to endure yet another song to the same old tune in which Goopy asks "Uncle Tiger" to be kind to them. It is another weak point in the film, in which the action has been further drawn out with nothing to sustain it.

The film draws to a close in the lurid royal laboratory with its garish décor, its bizarre gadgetry and its caged rats, bats and monkeys. The scene brings virtually everyone together: Goopy and Bagha, the king and his ministers, Udayan and his boys as captives, and the soldiery and the royal scientist. The king would seem to be triumphant, but his order to have Udayan and the boys brainwashed is sabotaged by the now suitably bribed scientist who is supported by the soldiers who have just had their palms enriched by Bagha. Yet another song from Goopy offers a litany of all the king's wrongdoings, something utterly gratuitous as these have been elucidated sufficiently already. His call for the king and his ministers to be punished is taken up by Udayan, and the king and all his wicked cohorts are herded into the brainwashing chamber.

It is a pity that bribery has to play such a significant part in bringing about a just conclusion, but at least it is economical

[12] Perhaps the joke may be enhanced by remembering that Bagha's name means 'tiger'.

and does after all utilise the definitive resources of the plot, namely diamonds. Any moral uncertainty on this score, however, is more than overcome by the brainwashing machine's rehabilitation of the king and his ministers who are last seen rushing out to join Udayan and all the citizens of Hirak in dismantling the recently erected statue of the erstwhile tyrant. The war that had to happen has been averted, non-violence has triumphed, and the instruments and instrumentalities of evil have been turned to good. However, this is but an anti-climax, for the film has to end with yet another Goopy and Bagha song in which they sing, as in an advertising jingle, of themselves and their virtues.

The visual contrast between the two Goopy and Bagha films is notable, not only by virtue of the fact that one is in black and white and the other in colour. Visual interest is maintained in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* by a more frequent change of space than is the case with *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. In the latter film, which by comparison suffers for so many drawn-out sequences, visual interest is very much based on the brilliance of the colour, a quality that is maintained throughout. The opening scene in the palace of Shundi is especially striking with its emphasis on bright but soft colours—pale blue, pink, silver grey—and the expanse of walls and floors in white and cream evoking light and brightness. The opening scene in the palace of Hirak presents a significant contrast, although one that is by no means as stark as that provided by the scenes inside the palace of Halla in the earlier film. Here the creams and whites of Shundi are superseded mainly by various darker shades of blue. The scene in which the foreign visitors are welcomed to the kingdom of Hirak is set in a different hall of the palace, also impressive in its colours yet again distinct from the other two palace scenes. The exterior shots are particularly well conceived by exploiting the visual potential of rocky hills, lush forest, a beautiful mountain lake and plains interestingly enough broken up by trees and the

occasional boulder. The designs for the treasury and the mine are sufficient for their purposes.

While the film as a visual experience is indeed memorable, the same cannot be said for its plot which, in comparison with *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, is decidedly weak. The problem lies in the dominance accorded to Goopy and Bagha and the consequent under-writing of the character of Udayan and the minimising of the significance of his boys. However, the narrative role of Goopy and Bagha is, in fact, dependent on Udayan. Had it not been for him, they would have gone to Hirak as guests of the king, been royally feted and gone back home as though from a sumptuous holiday. It is their meeting with Udayan in his mountain hideout that brings Goopy and Bagha to an awareness of the real nature of Hirak and its king and which persuades them – albeit spontaneously—to work in the interests of the teacher and his movement. But what movement? Snippets of suggestion, mainly the two slingshot assaults, are all that we get. Udayan himself—on the one hand a humble, dedicated schoolmaster and on the other a prominent freedom fighter—immediately has the potential to provide an interesting, even complex character, a thought-provoking, realistic counter to the fantasy comic-strip characters of the court of Hirak and its visitors from Shundi. Unfortunately, Ray has written him as a cardboard cut-out, so missing the chance to provide for Soumitra Chatterjee an opportunity to create something truly memorable out of the role.

This slender plot is advanced by words which are not the expression of ideas but contrivances of effect, especially in the rhymes of the court poet and the platitudes of the king and his ministers. This is appropriate, however, in representing the sloganism and its shallow thinking on which authoritarian systems are based. What is significantly lacking is a counter to this shorthand thinking, a noble alternative that is not to be found in the simplistic songs of Goopy and Bagha nor in the

minimal dialogue of the scantly written Udayan. Indeed, the story book of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* has been superseded by an elementary textbook in *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The meagre plot sustains the simple and repeated message – or set of slogans - that the king and his ministers are bad and the people of Hirak are sore oppressed; that the humble schoolmaster is an appropriate liberator who can achieve his goal only with the aid of Goopy and Bagha, who are good. The emphasis on the message more than on the story out of which it might naturally emanate does lend a didactic nature to the film, and given that the message is, in its topicality, so close to home, the fantasy and fable elements of the film often appear incongruous in a way that was not possible in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. Rather than provide an intelligently crafted integration of the entertainment elements and the moral lesson, *Hirak Rajar Deshe* presents a confusion of the two.

Nevertheless, there is some worth to be derived from the film's moral endeavour. The warning that language, so fundamental to the notion of civilisation, can be used to propagate evil, such as in the peremptory pronouncements of the king, the doggerel of the court poet and the very notion of brainwashing, is a truly pertinent one, especially if it enjoins us to weigh very carefully the words of politicians, even in a liberal democracy. The recognition of violence, as in the destruction of the poor people's slum or the allusions to whipping of mine workers, rather than any graphic celebration of it, is consonant with Ray's staunch humanitarianism. The essentially non-violent resolution of the film's simple conflict between good and evil would certainly have met with the approval of the Mahatma, despite the rehabilitation coming from a questionable short-cut indulgence in venality. The bringing down of the statue of the tyrant king of Hirak is an interesting portent of similar scenes in places such as eastern Europe nine or ten years later.

Hirak Rajar Deshe is notable more for the opportunities it misses than for what it offers. While it has much that entertains,

it also has substantial sources of tedium. It has, indeed, the ingredients of thought-provoking drama for the young, but it obscures them to a large extent by an exaggerated belief in the cinematic strength of two actors and their stale songs.

From 1965 Satyajit Ray wrote thirty-five novellas about the private investigator, Pradosh Mitter, known familiarly as Feluda.[13] They are stories with a universal appeal that is consciously inclusive of young people. Ray himself wrote about this work, "To write a whodunit while keeping in mind a young readership is not an easy task, because the stories have to be kept 'clean'. No illicit love, no *crime passionnel*, and only a modicum of violence. I hope adult readers will bear this in mind when reading these stories."[14] In fact, there is no need to bear this in mind at all, for the stories speak eloquently for themselves without the clichéd encumbrances that Ray refreshingly avoids, and his talent as a storyteller is not restricted by appeal to any particular age group.

Ray follows a tradition in giving his detective an assistant as, for example, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave Watson to Holmes, or the immensely popular Bengali writer, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, gave Ajit to Byomkesh.[15] The Sherlock Holmes and the Byomkesh Bakshi stories are written in the first person by Dr Watson and Ajit respectively, and Ray gives the task of telling the Feluda stories to Felunath's younger cousin, Tapesh Ranjan, known familiarly as Topse.

Nearly all the novellas would lend themselves well to a cinematic version, which is hardly surprising given that they

[13] The novellas appeared regularly until Ray's death in 1992, the final story being published posthumously in 1995. Seventeen appeared in *Sandesh*, another seventeen appeared in *Desh*, and one appeared in *Anandamela*.

[14] Author's Note in *The Complete Adventures of Feluda*, 2 Vols., translated by Gopa Majumdar, Penguin Books India, 2000, p. vii.

[15] Ray's film *Chidiakhana* was based on a story by Saradindu (see Chapter 3).

were written by a top-class filmmaker. However, Ray has had to adapt his stories to the screen with one major difficulty to overcome, and that is the literary role of Topse being impossible to render cinematically. In the novellas everything is reported as he has seen or otherwise experienced it. In cinema, however, the role of a narrator is now outdated—and usually unnecessary, anyhow—and so Topse is seen as an assistant functionary with very little to say.

Sonar Kella and *Jay Baba Felunath*, the two films that Ray made from this collection of stories—sadly, there are only two—appeal, like their literary sources, just as readily to parents and grandparents as they do to a younger audience. Central to them both, as in the novellas, is Feluda, a young, intelligent, remarkably perceptive detective with an extraordinary memory. His constant companion is his cousin, the affable Topse, seen in both novellas and films as an admiring and devoted acolyte. It is in the sixth novella, *Sonar Kella*,[16] that Ray introduces an inseparable third, Jatayu—or Lalmohan Ganguly—a prolific writer of popular detective fiction. To underline his appeal to a young audience, Ray chose for his films stories in which children feature prominently. Focal to the mystery of *Sonar Kella* is a young boy, while a slightly younger boy is intricately involved in solving the mystery in *Jay Baba Felunath*.

Despite the unrestrained feeling of optimism in which both Feluda films are presented, the opening scene of *Sonar Kella*, which precedes the opening titles, is one of apparent gloom. From a silent Calcutta street, dark except for some dim street lighting, the camera takes us inside a house and focuses on a bed, moving from right to left to show a mother and her young daughter sleeping, and then to show an empty space on the left side of the bed. The camera moves across the dark room to bring into its ambience a small boy—maybe seven or eight years old—sitting at a desk drawing pictures. As the clock strikes three, we

[16] First published in 1971.

might note the oddness of this sight, while the mother, waking to find the boy's place in the bed empty, wakes the father to tell him, "He's doing it again". She confirms our suspicion that this is something of a habit, adding that for some time the boy has not slept or—significantly, as we shall see—smiled. The parents' endeavours to coax the child back to bed are met with a resolute resistance as the boy does not even look up from his drawing, which the camera shows as a picture of a peacock – something that will be shown later, along with the lack of a smile, also to have significance. He goes on to tell us about his other pictures, which he turns over before the camera: a camel, soldiers fighting in a war, and himself standing before his house and, finally, the grand citadel inside which the house is situated, the Golden Fortress. The costumes and architecture are clearly of a bygone era and, in their storybook nature, offer an appealing mystery for us to mull over during the opening titles sequence. From the virtual monochrome occasioned by the dim lighting in the otherwise darkened room, the opening titles are displayed along with other drawings of the world of the Golden Fortress in bright colour, the gaiety of which is slightly offset—as might well be appropriate in a mystery film – by a somewhat sinister musical backing. This extraordinary juxtaposition of the commonplace of the suburban home and the storybook world of the boy's pictures creates a highly original and compelling opening.

Sonar Kella may be divided into three broad sections: an introduction, set in Calcutta; a kind of longer, secondary introduction, set on one train between Calcutta and Delhi and another between Delhi and Jaipur; and the major working out of the drama in various parts of Rajasthan.

The Calcutta introduction serves to establish two mysteries, in fact. The first mystery is the domestic one introduced in the prelude to the film; the second is the crime that will engage Feluda's powers for the rest of the film. In an interview with a

journalist the little boy at the centre of attention in the prelude, Mukul Dhar, gives rise to the possibility that the pictures he has been drawing relate to his life in a previous incarnation. He talks of his home in a golden fortress and of a war he saw fought with bows, arrows and swords. A ring on the journalists' finger reminds Mukul that he once had a similar one and that there were many 'coloured stones' in his house. The boy's utter ingenuousness percolates through the interview and it is very difficult to believe that he is inventing any of it, preferring to say in answer to several questions, "I don't remember," rather than to contrive an impressive answer. We learn from the journalist that Mukul is about to go to Rajasthan with one Dr Hazra to see if and how his memory might be jogged. Mr Dhar also reports that his son has been extraordinarily distracted for some time and seems to have lost the ability to smile. When asked by the press photographer to smile, Mukul asks disarmingly, "Why?" That the picture will be better if he smiles does not persuade him. "I don't feel like smiling," he says with a straight face, and there is an immediate cut to that same face in the newspaper with the journalist's article beside it.

While what emerges from this scene is the problem of a disturbed little boy, what is salient to the newspaper article is what the journalist describes as the treasury of jewels that was 'definitely kept in secret' in the boy's house in the golden fortress, and it is this simple journalistic emphasis that turns the story from one about rebirth into a crime mystery.

The cut from the pose for the photographer to the newspaper article shows the article in the hand of someone whose attention has been captured by the reference to the jewels. The same hand is then seen dialling a number in a public telephone box (a good detective would have noted the large signet ring on one of the fingers) and a voice is heard telling the party at the other end to look at the article in view of a get-rich-quick scheme. Hence the incipient crime is suggested, and the next cut is to

a car and a street and a young boy sitting outside a house. There are two men in the car, but we see only their hands, including the one with the prominent signet ring on the finger. Their interest is in the boy, whom they seek to identify as the Mukul of the newspaper picture. As he runs off down the lane to retrieve a kite, the car is seen to follow him. The men get out and ask him to take them to an address—that of the Dhar family—and, in the process, kidnap him.

By showing no more of the two men than their hands and, when they get out of the car, their legs, Ray is establishing the aura of his mystery and whetting the interest of his audience in his as yet unidentified characters. Their villainy is obvious, but there are also some indications of their ineptitude. The close-up in the telephone box of the one who calls himself Mr Bose reveals his difficulty in getting coins into a slot and his apparent clownishness in a remark he makes to the other man about not shouting in a public phone box. Then, despite the fact that one of them has Mukul's picture in his hand, they pick up the wrong boy (the fact that his name happens, coincidentally, to be Mukul too does not really excuse their ineptness). Of course, they don't know that Mukul has left for Rajasthan with Dr Hazra, and this feature of mystery stories—characters not knowing what other characters do know—will be prominent from time to time; even Feluda will be subject to its temporary torment.

We then follow Mr Dhar, who has gone to meet Feluda on the recommendation of some mutual acquaintance. The point of this scene is first to establish two of Ray's core characters. At first only the bottom half of Feluda is seen—upside down—as he practices his morning yoga exercises. We glean something of his concern for precision in matters of time, and his keen reading of the daily press from his awareness of details of the article that appeared the day before. We also see Topse as Feluda's willing assistant, one who, according to his father (Feluda's uncle) will

learn more from his extraordinary cousin than from any teacher in his school.

The second point of the scene is one of simple narrative, that is, the engaging of Feluda in the matter. But what is the matter? We learn from Feluda that the Dr Hazra who has taken Mukul to Rajasthan is renowned as a parapsychologist, so it is not Mr Dhar's intention to have Feluda solve the enigma of Mukul's previous life. It is at the mention of the kidnapping of the other Mukul—who had been returned to his home unconscious, having been drugged—along with the prominence in the newspaper article of the treasury of jewels, that Feluda instantly sniffs the probability of dirty work. The two men whom we have not yet identified are serious criminals, not because of their greed for jewels but because of their readiness to kidnap and drug a little boy in order to satisfy that greed.

Ray reveals his two villains to us gradually. At first they are just hands and voices, then legs. Then the neighbours' Mukul reports that they had whiskered faces. We know that the name of one of them is Bose, and a few hours after Mr Dhar has met Feluda we learn that the other's name is Burman as they look at a passenger list outside their compartment of the Tufan Express due to leave for Delhi that morning at 9.35. In fact, Bose and Burman are not men of any great substance, and it was probably a good idea of Ray's to let them develop to some extent in the imagination of his viewers first before revealing them for what they are. Moreover, Ray wants his audience to know that his crooks are also fools. (Maybe he is even suggesting a necessary connection here – and it is not a bad little moral lesson at that—for there is an element of the absurd in the baddies in all four of the films made for young people.) Such a delicate connection between clownishness and wickedness might have been obscured had it not been so carefully established. While people who kidnap children may well deserve to be hanged, as Feluda later suggests, it is not necessary for Ray to present his

villains as monsters who instil fear in the younger members of his audience. However, Feluda regards them as serious criminals in that the kidnappers of one Mukul are likely to set out to kidnap the other; therefore, Mukul Dhar's life might well be in danger. Compelling practical concerns have made parapsychology and the mysteries of rebirth mere interesting sidelines.

In sending Feluda to an old mentor, 'Uncle' Sidhu, to find out a little more about Dr Hazra, Ray once again indulges his playful scorn of godmen, so many of whom are prone to be crooks. It turns out that Hazra once investigated a swami rejoicing in the name of Bhabananda and his disciple who, some twelve years earlier in Allahabad, claimed to cure people of any disease at all through hypnotism. Dr Hazra's innocent investigation exposed their fraud and sent them packing. It will be an easy but credible enough coincidence that Bhabananda and his disciple will soon be revealed as Burman and Bose.

We can assume that Burman and Bose are on their way to Delhi, while a brief scene outside the Red Fort shows that Mukul and Dr Hazra are already there, Mukul disappointed and a little impatient that this is not his golden fortress. There is then an interview with Feluda and the other Mukul, which reinforces the suspicion that his two kidnappers are more than likely to be on their way to Jodhpur. We then learn that Mr Dhar has sent a telegram to Dr Hazra informing him that Feluda is on his way "to protect Mukul against possible criminal mischief". Feluda and Topse leave for Delhi on the Tufan Mail the next morning at 9.35.

There then follows an interesting and cleverly arranged section, set mainly in two trains, which brings protagonists, antagonists and associates close to and even into each other's orbit. Ray signals his intention to simulate a propinquity of the major elements in his plot by risking a confusion of trains in the perception of his audience. As soon as the two pairs of legs belonging to Bose and Burman seek out their berths on the

Delhi-Ajmer train, we see them boarding and entering their compartment—one has a moustache and bushy sideburns and the other has a moustache and goatee beard. The villains are now established. The camera, from outside the window, shows them arranging their luggage, and then moves slowly from left to right of the frame to reveal, two compartments along, Dr Hazra and Mukul. The camera then moves slowly back to the left, stopping on a bag, not seen in the previous left to right pan, belonging to Feluda. The unwary might be forgiven for thinking he and Topse are on the same train as Bose and Burman, Hazra and Mukul, but the nature of the change of shot and the immediately preceding shots of clocks should make it clear that Feluda and Topse are still on the Tufan Mail, and will be for some hours to come. Ray has planted too red herrings as company for them: one, a man with dark glasses, a heavy moustache and smoking a cigar, the other traditionally clad and sleeping. The latter has no luxuriance of whiskers, giving reason enough for Feluda to disabuse Topse's suspicions.

At this point we might consider the credibility of Ray's focal character, the little boy, Mukul. Most people tend to be at least a little sceptical about the supernatural, so when a small boy starts to talk about his previous life we might be patronisingly sympathetic but offer no credence. Mukul's urge to re-create his fragments of memory through drawing brings him from his bed in the early hours of the morning, distracts him from his studies and takes away his good humour. His parents are quite emphatic about an apparent personality change that has come over their son while he has been experiencing these particular 'memories'. It is also quite clear that Mukul is not making up his story. If he does not know the answer to a question he will admit it rather than invent an answer; if he does not remember, he will not try to create a memory. In fact, others might be blamed for being somewhat creative with what Mukul has told them. On the Delhi-Ajmer train Dr Hazra raises the question of a treasury

of jewels in Mukul's house in the Golden Fortress. Mukul is somewhat perplexed. "That's what you told the journalist," Hazra reminds him. Mukul denies this, and quite correctly. He had said simply that there were lots of coloured stones in his house, and from this the journalist, perhaps having enjoyed a surfeit of storybooks in his own childhood, infers treasure and Bose and Burman all too readily believe it. Now, on the train, Mukul adds that his father used to break up these stones. More realistic than the romantic journalist, Dr Hazra intelligently suggests that his father had been a gem-cutter. A few minutes later, when Mukul meets the two crooks who are in pursuit of him, they raise the question of treasure; he simply ignores it and turns a question of his own on them.

Quite by accident as, for the sake of tidiness, so often is the case in detective stories, Bose and Burman encounter Mukul and, by means of Bose's conjuring tricks, proceed to inveigle themselves into his confidence. When Bose accompanies the boy back to his compartment, he is alarmed to see Dr Hazra sitting there. It is here that we confirm the earlier implied suspicion that Bose and Burman are the two former religious charlatans exposed by Hazra in Allahabad twelve years before. Of course, Hazra does not recognise them because, as Burman points out, they looked very different all those years ago. And so the two conmen ingratiate themselves with Dr Hazra as well, Burman claiming to be one Mr Bagchi researching, coincidentally, Rajasthani forts. Dr Hazra wants to leave the train in Jaipur in order to show Mukul the Nahargar Fort there, and as they go off with their two new companions, there is a cut to the Tufan Mail.

On the train to Delhi Feluda expresses to Topse his concern that the two crooks might well have caught up with Mukul by now. Mukul should be safe, at least for as long as he is needed by them, but one cannot be sure of Dr Hazra's safety. "Whoever would kidnap a seven-year-old boy and dump him unconscious

in the street is not likely to have pity on a fifty-year-old doctor." We then cut to the Nahargar Fort in Jaipur where Bose is walking with Dr Hazra, Burman and Mukul having gone on ahead and out of sight. Bose entices Dr Hazra to the edge of the very steep hill they are ascending and suddenly pushes him over the side. A few moments later Bose hurriedly persuades Mukul that by magic 'Uncle Doctor'—a 'bad man', in fact—has vanished and that here, in the person of Burman, is the 'real' Dr Hazra. Mukul, who knows another Mukul, readily accepts that. They go off happily together and there is a cut to a close shot of Dr Hazra lying among the rocks quite some way below; a slight movement reassures us that he is not dead.

The Tufan Mail eventually reaches Kanpur and one Lalmohan Ganguly boards the train to finds himself in the same compartment as Feluda and Topse. Ray allows a lengthy section for Feluda and Topse to get to know Lalmohan and, as they do, the plot is not really advanced save for a few more red herrings in the form of mountain bandits who cut off the noses of their victims and the inbuilt water supply of camels. Indeed, it is all something of a distraction as Santosh Dutta lays the foundation for the first of two brilliant performances as Lalmohan.[17] Under the pen-name of Jatayu he is a prolific writer of popular detective stories, many of which Topse has read and admired. Lalmohan and Topse readily form a mutual bond, and while Lalmohan enthuses greatly over meeting a real private detective, Feluda maintains a cautious detachment, though one which will soon dissolve. Lalmohan is an exceptionally affable man despite his obviously assumed imperiousness in his treatment of the porter who brings his luggage to the compartment. Like Topse, he has a ready and engaging smile and is easily brought to laughter. Although he is probably well into his forties, he demonstrates a genuine, boyish enthusiasm for virtually everything. However, his spirited optimism distinguishes him from Feluda, in that he

[17] Of course, he plays the same role in *Jay Baba Felunath*.

often misses the finer details that Feluda is so fastidious in picking up. A little later, when the man whom we know as Dr Hazra, patched up by a local doctor and disguised in traditional local dress, joins their compartment in Jaipur for the trip to Jodhpur, Lalmohan's imagination is unleashed. He cannot contain his creative doubts about a man who is bandaged in parts and wrapped in a red shawl. "Highly suspicious!" he exclaims to Feluda. Feluda is visibly unmoved, although his glance rests a little obviously on the man's evidently new shoes.

Burman and Mukul take up Dr Hazra's reservation at the Circuit House in Jodhpur, and Bose takes a neighbouring room. Waiting for Dr Hazra is Mr Dhar's telegram intimating the arrival of Feluda. Sensing that he is cornered, Burman's plan is to eliminate Feluda, the means being a deadly scorpion which Bose is to capture in a jar and let loose in Feluda's room.

The view of Bose and Burman, presented at the outset, as slightly comical, somewhat bumbling villains, is reinforced when they appear on the train playing Snakes and Ladders, at which Bose—dressed in a ludicrous, loud shirt that looks like a mosaic of playing cards—is caught cheating. They look forward to playing Ludo later. Bose's ability to perform conjuring tricks fits in with this image. We see the insidious complexity of the pair when Bose pushes Dr Hazra over the side of the mountain to a seemingly certain death, and then represents it to Mukul as another disappearing trick, using the English word 'vanish' in answer to Mukul's question about Dr Hazra as he had used it about the rupee coin in his first trick. Their nastiness is enhanced by Burman's murderous plan with the scorpion. The real source of joviality in the film is the genuinely good Lalmohan Ganguly, who inspires joy with his ready smile and laughter. We laugh *with* Lalmohan; we laugh *at* the two crooks, and with at least some element of contempt.

The second half of the film is visually enhanced by the splendid shots of Rajput architecture and, by contrast, the harsh Rajasthani

landscape. Magnificent citadels in Jaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer, which are central to the quest for the golden fortress, dominate the background and proclaim a magnificence infinitely beyond the nefarious machinations of Bose and Burman. In a more mundane sense they also lend a lofty dimension to the simple visual appeal of the film. The barren landscape provides an enigmatic environment for this architectural grandeur and joins with the citadels to emphasise the distance from Calcutta as well as from the present. There are two brief musical diversions that also enhance the cultural context. One is a street singer in Jodhpur singing a devotional song and accompanying herself on a traditional instrument. The song appeals to Mukul and draws him close to the singer, perhaps suggesting a link with his remote past. Later, while waiting for a train at the rural outpost of Ramdeora, a few rustics entertain a small audience with traditional instrumental and vocal music, complete with ecstatic gesturing. In their own way these two snippets of folk culture both aurally and visually contribute to the grander atmosphere.

The narrative has the group going from one fort to another in search of Mukul's erstwhile 'home'. When Burman eventually decides to try to hypnotise the boy to find out its precise location, Mukul in his trance says 'Jaisalmer'. During this time Feluda develops suspicions of the two men whom we know to be crooks from simple slips they make. Bose, the more outgoing buffoon of the two, gives rise to mistrust reasonably soon, and Feluda has niggling though indefinable doubts about Burman's claim to be Dr Hazra. And then there is the mystery of the man we know as the real Dr Hazra and his keeping a watch on Mukul. Ray intrudes him very subtly here and there into the sphere of action, and his spying is almost a secret except for his being noticed by the ever alert and perceptive Feluda. It is the excursion to Jaisalmer that unravels the mystery of who is wearing what masks.

That the golden fortress is located in Jaisalmer is known only to Bose and Burman, and in order to keep Feluda and his

associates off the scent Burman plans to plead the need for Mukul and himself to rest, while sending Feluda, Topse and Lalmohan to visit the local fort in Jodhpur. In the town Lalmohan quite incidentally points out to Feluda a shop selling wares of yellow limestone, a product of Jaisalmer, so setting off a new train of thought in Feluda's continually active mind. Once they have left the guesthouse, Burman takes Mukul to board a train for Pokhran, where Bose will meet him by car and from the there the two will proceed with Mukul to gather up their treasure in Jaisalmer. When Feluda and the others return, Bose tells them that Dr Hazra and Mukul have gone – urgently, at Mukul's insistence—to a fort in Burmer, and would they please met them there. Bose, for his part, has had enough of all these forts and plans, he tells them, and has decided to go back to Jaipur. It is a simple thing like toying with Dr Hazra's introduction card that brings Feluda to smell a very significant rat. He discovers, on inquiry, that the Circuit House register has been filled in by one 'M. J. Hazra', whereas the card is clearly printed with the less common alternative spelling of the name, 'Hajra'.[18] And so they set off by car to Jaisalmer, where a fort made of yellow limestone might well be the golden fortress of Mukul's supernatural recollections. Overhearing their intentions, Bose goes on ahead to spread large shards of broken beer bottles over parts of the lonely road, and eventually their car's punctures outnumber its spare tyres.

The inability to proceed by car gives rise to a delightful interlude providing even more visual variety as the three proceed to the nearest railway station on camelback. There is amusement in seeing Lalmohan, so thrilled to be riding a camel yet so tentatively in control of the situation, and so stiff and sore at the end of the journey. In this sequence we might remember the gentle allusions to the co-existence of the traditional and the

[18] In Bengali, at least as it is spoken in Kolkata, the English letters *j* and *z* are both pronounced as the *j* in *jewel.*

modern earlier in the film, and now Ray plays another variation on that theme in some very appealing cross-cutting that juxtaposes the stately beasts crossing the landscape at their dignified leisure and the noisy steam train careering through the desert. However, the ships of the desert and the iron horse remain in permanently separate realms as Feluda and his companions try desperately to flag the train down, but this train stops for no one between stations, not even camel riders wearing fashionable Western style clothes. There is a strong hint of the American western here, spelled out more obviously in the literary version of the story: " ... I couldn't help thinking that I might have seen such a scene only in a Hollywood western. Not once did I ever imagine that I would witness a scene like that in my own country!"[19]

It is not until quite late in the piece that Feluda becomes aware that Bose, in similar disguise to Dr Hazra's, is among the other people at the Ramdeora station, waiting for his chance to carry out Burman's instructions to finish off Feluda. At the musical performance near the station Feluda's eye catches the extravagant signet ring that was our clue to his identity early in the film. Once Feluda and his two companions board the train, the detective is ready for him. There is no violent showdown, as there would certainly have been in a commercial film. There is a scuffle and Feluda, winning the better of it, holds Bose at gunpoint, a situation that the well-meaning but utterly inept Lalmohan destroys in trying to win back the knife that Bose had earlier filched from him. However, in turning this capture into an anticlimax, the worst that comes of it is Bose's escape from Feluda's compartment. Ray has something far more cinematically impressive in mind for Mr Bose than Feluda's handing him over to the police.

There are countless examples in Ray's films of an acute sense of tidiness and balance, and the elimination of Bose is but one

[19] Satyajit Ray, *op.cit.*, p.249

of them. Since the exposure by Dr Hazra of Bose and Burman in Allahabad twelve years earlier, Bose first encountered Dr Hazra on a train, and so it is fitting that his last meeting with the man should also be on a train. To attend even more closely to detail, both encounters cause great alarm to Bose. In his flight from Feluda's compartment he stumbles hurriedly into one occupied—as justice would have it—by the sleeping Dr Hazra. He is woken by the noisy Bose and sits up on his bunk, looking for all the world like the ghost of Banquo complete with the twenty trenched gashes on his head, albeit bandaged by a Jaipur surgeon. Just as Macbeth believed Banquo to have been killed, so too did Bose think he had permanently dispatched the unsuspecting doctor. Hence, the shock of seeing him, particularly in this guise and in this light, is too great for Bose and, in panic, he falls from the speeding train.

The final scene of the film is largely an exercise in tying up loose ends, although one remains untied beyond the film's end. Feluda comforts the real Dr Hazra, and then goes off to the fort to save Mukul from the one remaining danger. At the still magnificent yet partly ruined citadel it is clear that Mukul has at last found his golden fortress as he goes about pointing out houses and naming the children who lived in them. There is then a strange and quite unexpected rupturing of what had been a relatively comfortable relationship between Mukul and Burman, although it had been anticipated on the road some time earlier when the car was stopped to let Mukul get out and look at a peacock. This particular fondness was established as was Burman's pronounced aversion to peacocks, stemming apparently from an aversion that one of them took to him forty years back. In the golden fortress, just as Mukul seems to be getting close to his own house and the wealth that Burman believes it to contain, the crook is confronted once again by his avian nemesis. In just a few moments his aggression to the bird, even drawing his pistol to shoot it, destroys completely whatever

trust Mukul might have had in him, and instead of sinking his hands in precious stones he finds himself chasing Mukul about the citadel, for the boy now is determined to get away from such a bad man. It is here that Feluda the marksman enters, shooting the gun from Burman's hand and having Singh, the driver, pick him up and carry him off to the police station, so provoking peals of joyous laughter from the hitherto humourless Mukul.

When he met Dr Hazra after they stepped off the train at Jaisalmer station, Feluda was startled to learn that there was no hidden treasure. The audience, of course, has known all along Mukul's memory of his father as a gem-cutter, and now the look on Feluda's face reflects the full import of a journalist's sensational though imprecise reporting. A newspaper exaggeration has almost killed Dr Hazra and endangered the life of Mukul, not to mention what might have happened to Feluda and his companions had it not been for Bose's vulgar signet ring.

As the film reaches its happy conclusion with the crooks brought in one way or another to justice and Mukul being taken home to Calcutta by the goodies, we may consider the case closed. But what mystery has in fact been solved? Feluda has been able to prevent the fulfilment of a plan that might have meant grievous harm for a little boy. Indeed, in one sense he has been more of a bodyguard than a detective, unravelling the intricacies of the intended crime as well as the incidental crimes of kidnapping and attempted murder. But what was the intended crime? Looting a house of treasure that was accumulated there centuries before, based on a small boy's memories of his 'previous life'? The intention, in fact, amounts to no more than a wild goose chase. The real mystery, the one pertaining to the very credibly expressed intimation of an alleged previous life of a seven-year-old boy, remains unsolved. Until the story gets us to Jaisalmer, sceptics might be vindicated by putting it all down to the disturbed mind of a small boy, but Mukul's obvious sense

of identity inside the fort, naming the children who lived in the various houses he comes across and talking of the temple that stood nearby, provide strength for the proponents of rebirth and cast at least a suggestion of doubt upon the sceptics. Ray has been clever. The ball is really in the court of the expert in parapsychology, but now that the private investigator has done what he was engaged to do, the story is over and the good doctor's theories must be the subject of another story.

Of course, such unanswered questions may provide a talking point for those whose curiosity has been sparked by the film. Ray has not only given his audience something to take away with them in wondering about what Dr Hazra might eventually have had to say about Mukul's 'memories', but he has also given them a particularly fine film to remember—one with a good and intelligent story set in a visually impressive context.

Jay Baba Felunath is an even better film than *Sonar Kella.* While it obviously lacks the depth of most of the films Ray made for a more mature audience, *Jay Baba Felunath* is, nevertheless, one of his more memorable works. Like *Sonar Kella* it has an intelligent story, it is superbly acted by a uniformly polished and experienced cast, it is beautifully photographed and exquisitely mounted. Indeed, it is immensely enjoyable quite irrespective of one's age.

Aficionados of Ray might receive something of a gentle jolt on first seeing the film. The initial title shot is of a flock of pigeons bursting into flight, reminding us of that sublime moment in *Aparajita* when a soaring flock marked the death of Harihar Ray. However, this time the camera does not follow the birds as they wing heavenwards, observing from mundanity as it were the release of a soul into the infinite, but stays fixed on the stone which the birds have vacated to reveal a circular marker informing us of the title of the film, clearly implying the utter worldliness of what is to come. It is also a simple way of letting us know—if indeed it is at all necessary—that the Benares of

Felunath is quite a different Benares from that of Harihar. As we will see, this Benares is one of colour and not black and white, the colour underscoring its focus on fun and optimism rather than on struggle and stress. The irresistibly photogenic ghats, narrow lanes and the majestic Ganges itself will provide so much of the visual context of the film, but on it all will be indelibly stamped the ebullience of Felunath and his companions, not the religiosity of Harihar Ray. Mystery indeed will permeate here, but it will not be the mystery of the spirit but that of the strange, unpredictable and often devious workings of the human mind.

As in so many of Ray's films, the opening title shots are an incidental indication of the loving care and artistry that went into the making of the film. Here four circles, like blank clock faces, are presented against the background of what looks like a scroll painting depicting the traditional and exotic nature of the city in which the film is set; the title information appears in one circle, then is expunged as the next stage in the process is offered in the next circle, and so on. The background music to all this is particularly interesting: a melody that is reminiscent of a gentle gavotte played with an essentially Indian sound by strings in unison. The extraordinary and catchy music is something to wonder at while at the same time offering a lightness that might suggest we don't take things too seriously, for preciousness is not a feature of this film.

There are some entertaining and usually significant juxtapositions of opposites presented throughout the film, and several are offered in the opening scene to be repeated or improvised on later. The opening shot is an imposing representation of physical strength; juxtaposed with this is the frailty of age and the innocence of childhood. The scene depicts Shashi, the elderly artisan who has been engaged to provide the images of the gods that will be the focus of the Ghosal family's coming celebration of the Bengali religious festival, Durga Puja

(as Felunath points out a little later, there are a great number of Bengalis living in Benares), telling Ruku, Umanath Ghosal's young son, the story of the slaying of the Elephant Demon, which is depicted here in his sculpture. Typical of myth, the story is utterly implausible, with the gods Vishnu and Shiva breathing fire out of which the Mother Goddess Durga is born, a weapon in each of her ten arms.

On the surface of it the telling of the story might seem to be a decorative but irrelevant piece of background, but some important elements emanate from it. The first is the introduction of two characters, seemingly peripheral, who will take on an unexpected significance later on. The second is the mention of Durga's *vahan* or mount, the lion, which will just as unexpectedly assume prominence as the mystery starts to be unravelled. The third is Ruku's expression of the scepticism of a good detective in interrupting Shashi with the question, "Is all this true?" Although unwilling to accept things at face value, he is satisfied by the old man's answer, given the authority of antiquity to which it appeals, and stores the myth of Durga's slaying of the Elephant Demon along with Tarzan and Captain Spark, books about the latter being the little boy's current craze. Finally, the scene presents a conventional illustration of the perennial cosmic conflict between good and evil, so laying the ground for another conflict to be played out, albeit by mere mortals.

The world of timeless myth is dispelled by the sound of a motorcar horn and fantasy is dispelled by reality. Close up intimacy, with the boy and the old man before the imposing background of the titanic figures of myth, is abruptly replaced by a very long shot of the old man and his images, with Ruku moving towards the darkened foreground. A dramatic though ironically prescient word from the boy to the servant Bikash sets the stage for the entry of the villain, Maganlal Meghraj. The nature of his entry, largely under cover of darkness, coupled with his appearance, underline Ruku's precipitate judgement of

him. He has come to see Umanath, Ruku's father, and it is the connection between the two men that gives immediate cause for interest. Ray deals with this almost immediately. Umanath comes and greets his visitor and the two shuffle about in some self-conscious attempt at laughter before we learn that they were once university contemporaries. Maganlal's purpose in this visit is to buy from Umanath a treasured artefact – a small carving of the elephant god, Ganesh; Umanath pleads his inability to sell it as it belongs to his father and he will not be persuaded, so it seems, to relieve him of its ownership. We come to learn that Maganlal is involved in smuggling works of art out of the country to make huge profits from foreign dealers. A dignified exchange of barbs between the two establishes the tension in their relationship while also making us somewhat unsure of Umanath's innocence in whatever might emanate from this meeting. Two things of particular interest, however, come out of it: one is the fact that Umanath is undergoing problems with his business, thus making his refusal of the money offered him by Maganlal perhaps rather brittle; the other is the exact whereabouts of the Ganesh. "It's in my father's safe and the key is in his drawer," says Umanath, well within the hearing of Bikash who—might we not assume?—is the eavesdropper behind a curtain in the hall. Ray proceeds without delay to the next step in the drama. The potential crime becomes an actual crime, and although we see it being committed, we cannot make out who the culprit is.

With simple economy Ray has very smoothly set out the basic elements of the mystery and it is time to introduce the hero. Appropriately this is done by a direct contrast between the silent confines of the house at night and the open streets of the city in broad daylight; the new scene is enhanced by the music of the titles sequence, which we will now come to identify as Feluda's theme. Felunath Mitter and his two companions, his younger cousin, Tapesh, and their older friend, the eminent

writer of popular mystery stories, Lalmohan Ganguli, are being driven in two rickshaws to their Bengali guesthouse in Benares. As well as introducing the hero and his companions to us, Ray also uses the opportunity to introduce us to Benares and its ambience as a traditional temple town, an ironic context for a story about crime. But the main value of this scene is to establish a very important aspect of the film—happiness. Felunath is obviously a serious, thinking man, though by no means humourless, while Tapesh and Lalmohan are of value as much for their infectious smiles and laughter as for anything else. This is a lot more important than it may first seem, for the effect that Ray achieves by this is to elevate natural positive characteristics in a context of felony and deceit. Ray would want his viewers, especially those of tender years, to see that life is fun, even in the face of those who would seek to spoil it for the sake of their own devious ends.[20]

The film's title suggests a godman. As has been noted earlier,[21] Satyajit Ray was much closer to the reformist Brahmo Samaj than to orthodox Hinduism, and his attitude towards religion was an intelligent and rational one that did not allow for ritualism and superstition. He was particularly sceptical of godmen, with whom India—and especially Benares—abounds. *Mahapurush* deals specifically with fraudulence in holy guise, and there is a comic reference to the phenomenon in *Nayak*. The two crooks in *Sonar Kella* had been exposed as religious frauds. The 'baba' or holyman of the title, *Jay Baba Felunath*, is not, in fact, Felunath, but one Sacred Fish, alleged to have swum some hundred and sixty kilometres of the holy river Ganges from Allahabad to Benares. To us he is obviously a fake and, we will discover, a

[20] The potential for this facial transmission of joy was clearly evident in *Sonar Kella*. In *Jay Baba Felunath* the two actors, Santosh Dutta, who plays Jatayu, and an obviously four years older Siddhartha Chatterjee, who plays Topse, have their gifts exploited to even greater effect.

[21] Chapter 7.

crook, but like so many of his ilk, fake or saint, he draws the crowds including leading citizens such as Umanath Ghosal and, as chance would have it, one of the wealthiest men of the city, Maganlal Meghraj.

While the setting of the Sacred Fish's prayer meeting on the ghat beside the Ganges, along with his small retinue of devotional singers and musicians, has all the appearance of authenticity, the Baba himself does not look quite right—there is just a touch of the hippy about his unkempt locks and beard. Ray underlines whatever seed of doubt we may be harbouring when he has Felunath pick up through his binoculars a tattoo of an aeroplane on the holyman's arm. Our suspicions may be confirmed by his sermon, which is simply an enumeration of the numbers one to ten with examples of what commonly goes with each—one sun, two eyes, three tenses, four Vedas, five elements and so on until he gets to ten where he is able to bring his homily to the peak of its revelation, for among the wonders that come in tens are the incarnations of the god Vishnu, the tenth of which is triumphantly announced by the Baba as the Fish or, by implication, himself. Thus special significance is given to the presentation of fish scales to the faithful.

Having established doubt about the genuineness of this godman—and with more than an inkling of amusing satire—Ray now brings into this spiritual orbit Umanath Ghosal, who has come with his wife to the Baba's prayer meeting and, on meeting Felunath, foreshadows a case for him if he can win his father's approval. Drawn into the same orbit, on a luxurious houseboat, comes Maganlal Meghraj, recognised by Felunath for the notorious crook that he is, his presence here providing—at least on the surface, given our doubts about the holiness of the Fish at the centre of everyone's attention—another juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane.

One more element is brought into the enigma before Felunath embarks on his work of solving the mystery of the missing

elephant god. The three companions return to their four-bed dormitory room at the guesthouse to find their hitherto unknown roommate, naked above the waist and displaying the flamboyant mass of muscles that body-builders take such pains to nurture and publicly vaunt. The celebrity muscleman, Gunomoy Bagchi, is in Benares to display his physique at the Bengali Club, and after the formal introductions there is some trivial talk about muscles, albeit extremely important to Gunomoy, and a little slapstick comedy as he shows off his strength by picking up Lalmohan and swinging him about with consummate ease.[22] Ray has now given his audience one more ingredient to chew over in the digestion of this mystery—how does this magnificent specimen of cultivated flesh fit into the shady world of nocturnal burglary and international art smuggling?

As we begin to wonder, the continuity between this scene and the next is provided by Felunath being called to the phone to learn that the father of Umanath Ghosal is willing to engage his services in tracking down the thief of his treasured art work. As Lalmohan recovers from his sudden though temporary departure from the floor, there is a cut to a shot of the three companions walking resolutely through the gardens of the magnificent mansion of the Ghosals, only to be stopped in their tracks by a gunshot. Violence is a natural adjunct of crime and shooting is a common form of violence, so there should be nothing surprising in the presence of gunfire in the film. Significantly, however, the shots come from a toy gun fired by the intrepid incarnation of Captain Spark himself, Ruku, perched somewhat dangerously on the parapet at the top of the huge house. The welcome takes a more polite turn when Bikash meets them at the door and shows them inside.

The sequence of scenes at the Ghosals' house has four major focuses: an interview in the main sitting room with Umanath;

[22] Lalmohan has a somewhat puny build. We may remember his admiration for impressive physical dimensions in *Sonar Kella.*

a meeting with his father, Ambika Ghosal, in his room upstairs; an introduction to Ruku in 'Captain Spark's office' on the roof; and a brief and candid conversation with Bikash in his room and then in the garden. From all of this a number of significant points arise. Umanath asserts the value of the statuette to be around Rs 100,000, which reminds us that Maganlal Meghraj had offered twenty, then twenty-five, then thirty thousand for it. There is a note of pleasure as Lalmohan and Topse warm to Ruku in his defence of himself as Captain Spark, but the look on Felu's face suggests the burgeoning of a more thoughtful assessment of the boy, and this will be seen in fruition a little later. We also learn that Bikash is the orphaned son of one of Ambika's former servants and has stayed on in the house almost as part of the family, doing odd jobs. There is a subtle reaction of concern to Umanath's announcement of the name of the dealer who offered him money for the Ganesh, and whatever doubts we might have had about Umanath are intensified somewhat when he conspires with Felu to not mention to his father that Maganlal had come to try to buy the statuette. We know that the two men were at university together; we saw them both at the prayer meeting of the Sacred Fish; and now one might be seen to be protecting the other.

On the way upstairs another incidental element is thrown up for us to wonder about as we learn that the music being heard is from a gramophone belonging to Umanath's eighty-four-year-old grandfather, now so feeble that he has to have a man employed full-time to change his records for him. Could this man be a possible suspect?

Umanath's father, Ambika Ghosal, is found reclining on his veranda reading a detective novel. In some ways, especially in his words of introduction to his guests, he seems to be an elderly version of Ruku, utterly absorbed in the world of detective fiction. This is a point that Ray tries quite appropriately to underline and its full significance will be clear later. Ambika

shows Felunath a picture of the missing statuette and speaks of its artistic value, and yet there is a sense that he does not seem to be terribly distraught about the loss of something so precious. Indeed, his engagement of Felunath comes across more as an intellectual challenge than a cry for help. He does a simple re-enactment of the crime, then throws the ball into Felunath's court and goes back to his book. Felu casually picks up from a table a small children's book which, when its pages are flicked over quickly, reveals an animated picture. This is a simple yet clever shot in that it offers a syntactical link to the following scene, which will focus on Ruku, while at the same time establishing a special link between Ruku and his grandfather. Thus the hint of the similarity between the two is given a little more substance.

They go up to the roof to meet Ruku, whom Felunath addresses as Captain Spark. There is nothing patronising in this; Felunath's attitude to him is a completely genuine mixture of respect and affection. There is a lovely scene in which the three men explore Captain Spark's HQ, but what is particularly important is the rapport that is so easily established by Felunath with Ruku, enabling him to learn where, in fact, the statuette is – it is in the possession of an African king. This could easily be dismissed as childish creativity but Felu is careful to respect the boy's fondness for riddles. In short, the detective is perceptive enough to discern a very sharp young mind. Clearly he understands the importance of paying due heed to what children say. In the context of talk about weapons, Felunath offers something important to the little boy—and to the audience—in telling him that the most powerful weapon he has is what is kept between his ears.

Attention then shifts to the servant, Bikash, who offers an alibi for the time that Maganlal was with Umanath: he was in his room listening to a music recital on Lucknow radio. Our suspicions may be quite firm that it was he whom we saw

eavesdropping, and the fact that he has offered this alibi might only serve to deepen our suspicion of him, despite the fact that Ambika has dismissed out of hand the possibility of his having committed the crime. Having pointed out to him the precariousness of his position, Felunath elicits from him his own suspicion of Umanath who had, given his need for money, a motive for the theft.

Felunath then gets a call from the villain himself, inviting him and his companions to enjoy his hospitality. This scene with Maganlal Meghraj is one of only two (the other, significantly, involves him too) in which 'adult' violence is portrayed. It is noteworthy that in this case it is diluted with an element of farce. There is a visual suggestion of violence in the guide sent to bring the three to Maganlal's house—a thuggish looking stereotype of a crook's minor henchman. Maganlal himself is as unpolished, without quite being crude, as would seem appropriate in one rich in money and poor in morals; he remains lounging against his bolsters when his guests arrive and he does not return their *namaskars*. During the conversation a point of view shot of Topse reveals a gun propped behind a high ventilator.

But there is also a tinge of comedy to match this potential for violence. It is set up on the way when Lalmohan alludes to a stock element of detective fiction in warning his companions not to accept any offer of drinks. This gives rise to some well-acted amusement, particularly by Santosh Dutta as Lalmohan. The climax of the scene is a very funny piece in which an aged and decrepit knife-thrower demonstrates his skills with Lalmohan as the target for his knives to surround.

The knife-throwing act is intended by the bland Maganlal as a warning. Seeing through Lalmohan's reluctance to drink the sherbet he has served them, he reassures Lalmohan by expressing his distaste for poisoning, for "other things are more effective"—at which point the box of knives is brought in and displayed. The reason for this is Felunath's simple refusal to abide by

Maganlal's request to retire from the case, despite being offered Rs 2,000 to do so and despite being told that his employer is the culprit. According to Maganlal, Umanath had sold the Ganesh to him for Rs 30,000 in order to alleviate his business debts. Bearing in mind Umanath's keeping secret from his father the visit of Maganlal, we might now be even further suspicious of him. Felunath, however, is not convinced, especially when Maganlal will not show the statuette to him to prove his honesty; it is having his integrity doubted that persuades the honourable Maganlal to issue this somewhat theatrical warning to Felunath after the gun behind the ventilator is fired mistakenly.

The cut is to the three companions sitting beside the river, with Topse taking Lalmohan's pulse. Having been waved around by the body-builder, served what could have been poison by Maganlal, survived a shooting and then had twelve knives thrown at him by an ailing geriatric, Lalmohan's pulse is indeed racing. Felunath is downcast, feeling responsible for what has happened and the dangerous turn that it took, but he is also keenly assessing the development of the case so far.

The narrow progression now seems to take a few diversions as Ray offers some elements that might be significant in one way or another—or might not be. The first is Gunomoy packing his bags after finding an anonymous note on his bed telling him simply, "Be careful", and in fear of those he considers to be jealous of the magnificent temple that is his body he has decided to leave. He is, however, reassured by Felunath, who persuades him that the note was really intended for him. Then we have a brief scene with Ruku and Shashi, the latter applying red paint to his figures, so prompting Ruku to talk of the blood drawn by the spear of Durga. Then there is a cut to another part of the Ghosals' house and we see, for the first time, the music-loving grandfather and his disk-turning servant. The latter is seen mostly below the waist, his head obscured, while the shot of the old man is oblique, as he looks away from the

camera; no word is spoken. All of this may well provide food for thought, if only to try to see a reason for its presentation.

Of more obvious value is Ambika's informing Umanath that he knows about the visit of Maganlal and the talk that transpired between them. He also tells Umanath that he will have to take the consequences if it is proven that he opened the safe. Umanath does not offer any denial of what would seem to be something just short of an accusation, further underlining our suspicions of his role in the deed. And we may well be wondering how Ambika found out about Maganlal.

In case we are getting confused Ray has Felunath offer a progress summary. First, he declares that Maganlal cannot have the statuette, for if he did have it, he would not have tried to bribe Felu to give up the case. He also clears Umanath, arguing that if he were guilty he would not have been likely to recommend Felunath to his father. He also clears Bikash who, he believes, would have fled by now had he been guilty. And he believes that the statuette must be somewhere in the house of the Ghosals.

The next major turning-point in the unravelling of the mystery is when Felunath's remarkably acute eye notices on the arm of a pilgrim by the river the same tattoo he had observed on the arm of the piscine baba. He follows the man from the water to where he is staying, and a remarkable scene follows.

For a few moments Ray allows the camera to give us in colour much of the kind of Benares he had given in black and white in *Aparajita*—the long flight of steps up from the ghat, the traditional architecture, and the narrow lanes closed in on either side by buildings blocking out the light. It is all very beautiful and even exotic, but we are treated to no more of it than it takes for Felunath to get to his destination, for narrative is now of prime importance. The house to which he is drawn is a magnificent specimen of pre-colonial architecture, with a spacious courtyard, magnificent pillars and broad cloisters. As Felunath and his quarry would seem to be the only people in the house,

it is easy for the detective to follow, hide and observe. The whole sequence is a visual delight, but not merely for itself – Ray does not waste film on sensual indulgence – as it is cleverly interwoven with the narrative. It is also without dialogue, so providing both a dimension of suspense and a useful opportunity for the viewer to relax a little from the cerebral strain of mystery solving and simply observe. And that which is observed is the evidence that this fishy godman is no divine incarnation: false hair and beard, costumes, an ample supply of fish scales, and a very ungodly pistol. Thus the plot thickens, and while we may not be greatly surprised at the turn it has taken, we may fairly wonder at the direction in which it might be going – herein lies a simple and significant indication of Ray's skill in sustaining his audience's interest.

To further maintain variety and interest Ray turns to suspense as the context for some simple dialogue and a dramatic revelation. The three companions decide to go for a walk through the lanes of Benares at night. The darkness and the silence combine to create an atmosphere of eeriness, enhanced somewhat by Lalmohan's talk of haunted houses, bats and vampires and given an intensity by the two shots of a concealed figure lurking in the shadows and holding a knife. Counter to all this is set a seemingly innocent dialogue in which Felunath asks Lalmohan if in any of his stories there is an African king. There is a story, "The Crocodile's Grin" in which, Topse marvels, the diamond is brilliantly concealed in the crocodile's mouth. Of course, we are reminded of Ruku's words about the Ganesh being with an African king, and now we might start to wonder why this seemingly innocent idea is being talked about now in this particularly spooky setting. However, any thoughts of innocence are abruptly dispelled with the shot of a reeling figure at the end of the alley, soon discerned to be Shashi, the artisan, with a huge stab wound in his back. Ruku's talk of blood might seem to have had some point; maybe his allusion to the African king will prove significant too.

As Felunath would seem to have cleared Umanath from any implication in the crime, Bikash re-emerges as a major suspect when the detective, glancing through a radio programme guide, discovers that radio Lucknow had no musical programme at the time Bikash claimed to have been listening to one. With his alibi blown and his honesty compromised, the shadow of suspicion now hovers ominously over him.

Three things continue to perplex Felunath: the African king; the last word spoken by Shashi before he died in Felu's arms; and the role—if any—of Bikash in all of this. While we may be sharing Felunath's puzzlement, Ray teases us with another shot of Ruku's great-grandfather, a close medium shot this time, sitting in his chair. But the old man, along with his full-time record-turner, soon passes with Gunomoy the muscleman into the realm of the red herring. Felunath has another interview with Captain Spark, a.k.a. Ruku, in which it transpires that he was in fact the eavesdropper and Ambika's informant regarding the visit of Maganlal. Spark's assistant, Raxit, turns out to be his grandfather, with whom he is in close cahoots and with whom he has read the story, "The Crocodile's Grin" by Jatayu, the pen name of Lalmohan. The African king is the king of the beasts, the lion, and the lion—as Shashi informed Ruku in the opening scene of the film, is the *vahan* or mount of the goddess Durga. The statuette was hidden in the mouth of Shashi's carved beast, secured by Ruku's chewing gum, a concealment known only to Ruku and his grandfather. Thus Felunath is able to conclude that he was not appointed to catch a thief but one who intended to commit a theft. But as the Ganesh is no longer in the mouth of Durga's lion, it now really is stolen and the mystery remains unsolved.

An interview with Bikash reveals that the dislodged Ganesh was found and picked up by Shashi who, in great fear, brought it to Bikash to have it returned to Umanath, not knowing that Bikash had been suborned to steal the artefact for Maganlal. Given Shashi's innocence and excessive apprehensiveness, Bikash

had been able to hand the statuette over to his new patron without stealing it himself. However, for Maganlal's comfort, Shashi had to be eliminated. This was too much for Bikash, who merely played Judas for one of Maganlal's henchmen, and the poor old man was disposed of, uttering a word that sounds like the English word 'sing' with his final breath. It could be, as Topse suggests, the Sikh surname 'Singh', but it could also be the word for 'lion', *sinha*, which is also a Bengali surname and, as Felunath has already discovered, the surname of Bikash. And so it all falls neatly into place. Felunath hands Bikash over to the police saying, "He is only a little fish. Now we'll go for the big one." Thus Ray points to what will happen next.

The climactic scene provides the final justice in bringing the villain to book; it is also exciting, very clever and extremely funny. The trap is set for the unholy by a return to the prayer meeting. Topse and Lalmohan, disguised as *sadhus* or ascetics provide the substance of the comedy, Lalmohan loving every bit of it and over-acting almost to the point of risk. But the more meaningful disguise, complete with tattoo, is that of Felunath sitting in the place of honour before the adoring flock. The luxury boat of Maganlal Meghraj nears the ghat, and there is a sense of an imminent conclusion as he proceeds towards the 'holy man' and reverentially makes his offering to the Sacred Fish—or, to be more precise, the Sacred Fence of his smuggling operation—and is as stunned as most in the audience to see a revolver pointing at his heart. With a wonderful concern for ironic tidiness, Ray has Baba Felunath place his quarry against a wall and fires shots around him, declaring his various offences as he does so, recalling the way in which Lalmohan had been set up for the cruel (yet highly entertaining) knife-throwing diversion. To make the irony complete, after the last bullet has been fired Maganlal faints into the arms of the police Inspector.[23]

[23] Those who would like to follow Maganlal's career further might care to read *The Criminals of Kathmandu* in Satyajit Ray, *op.cit.*, Vol. 2.

The climax has been enacted, but the final explanations have to be made. The real Ganesh was all the time—and still is, we may assume—in a bank. The copy was concealed with Ruku's chewing gum in the mouth of the African king before Bikash, persuaded by Maganlal's money, could steal it from Ambika's safe. Proclaiming the power of brains over brawn, Captain Spark fires a shot into the air from his toy gun, so frightening a flock of pigeons from the ground to reveal, where the title was at the beginning, the words denoting the end of the film. Ray's films always conclude with the simple word *Samapta*, close enough to the English 'The End'. This one ends with the words *Khel Khatam*—or "The Game is Over".

It has indeed been a game, in which tactics and reading the mind of the opponent have been vital in determining the outcome. And like all good games the fun of the sport has been as important as the result.

Of fundamental importance to *Jay Baba Felunath* is the credibility of the narrative. Satyajit Ray was a prolific writer of detective stories, with a marked talent for presenting an intelligent, rational mystery without recourse to fantasy or make-believe. *Jay Baba Felunath* moves simply and logically from one well-established point to the next. The technique of narrative development has been treated with great care for the integrity of the film as a work of art and entertainment as well as for the young minds for which it was primarily intended. When examining the film in detail it is remarkable to see how many subtle signposts it contains. The importance of youth to the film is far from negligible in that characters such as Ruku and Topse offer points of identity for young viewers, while the not so young characters of Lalmohan and Felunath display a ready empathy for the young as shown in the warmth of their approach to little Ruku. While subtlety of character is considerably diluted, Ray also avoids simple stock types; characters like Maganlal Meghraj, for example, are obviously what they are while also

offering at least an element of substance. If this were not so it would not be possible to observe how particularly well acted this film is. Further, the treatment of criminality is worth considering. There is no doubt that Maganlal is a villain, that what is done to old Shashi is horrible, and that Bikash is not a readily trustworthy fellow, but Ray does not let his film dwell on any of the necessary negatives. Intellectual challenge, acute observation and rational interpretation are the all important positives that are highlighted. Most important of the positives is the film's sense of fun. The intellectual challenge is a game, not a business, and its enjoyment runs through the work, sustained by the easy smiles of Topse, the obvious amusement Felunath gets from time to time, and the ready engagement of Lalmohan with everyone he meets. The film exudes an obvious and infectious love of life.

Jay Baba Felunath is very skilfully structured. The context and basic elements of the mystery are carefully and clearly unfolded at the beginning. Gradually what starts out as a story of a simple case of burglary develops a complex plot, adorned by a few entertaining and teasing red herrings, about a theft, then an intention to commit a theft, with a murder in between. Of great importance to this film is the variety of mood and substance by which the director aims to maintain the interest of his audience. And there is, ultimately, a delightful irony in the fact that so much of the mystery, as it turns out, had been scripted by Lalmohan himself!

In these four films for young people Ray gives to his adult audience as much—and even more, in many ways—as he gives to the young. For the most part, but especially in the two detective films, his respect for his audience is paramount, restraining him from patronising the young in any way or from assuming a relatively limited intelligence on their behalf to justify giving them pap. Giving children what adults consider "kids' stuff" is not necessarily what children want. Ray respects them

for their intelligence, giving them scenarios that, for the most part, require them to do some critical and analytical thinking, and he also respects their discernment and so makes his films for them as technically polished and superbly acted as his more obviously adult films are. His characters are credible and, even in the fantasy films, easy to relate to the world of the young person's own experience. So much of the richness of the films appeals to the young's sense of wonder, exciting their imaginations with the storybook world of Goopy and Bagha as well as with the actual splendour of their own India. Most important, there is a significant moral dimension to all four films that gives the younger audience the chance to reason sound ethical judgements. Unlike the commercial purveyors of children's entertainment, Ray does not see his audience as sponges, there to absorb uncritically whatever is dished up to anaesthetise them, but as an indispensable ingredient in the experience of the art of cinema.

10 The Last Three Films: *Ganashatru, Shakha Prashakha, Agantuk*

Satyajit Ray's last three films were made in 1989, 1990 and 1991. In 1992 he died at the end of a decline in his health that began as early as 1984. Between *Ghare Baire* (1984) and *Ganashatru* (1989) his only film was a brief documentary.[1] As the gravity of his illness became clear, he was obliged to accept expert advice that if he were to go on making any more films, he should do so only in a studio, not on location, and that in the studio provision should be made for specialist medical care. In criticising his last films it should be borne in mind that the great filmmaker was now working under exceptionally restricting circumstances. The most telling consequence of this restraint was to make his last three films didactic, verbose and visually confined.

Ganashatru ("An Enemy of the People") is a credible Indian adaptation of Ibsen's powerful play. It has an aura of prophecy about it, not in the sense of predicting the future but in the

[1] On his father, Sukumar Ray, in 1987.

Old Testament sense of looking critically at one's society in order to avoid the dire consequences that might arise unless serious social ills are put right. It is set in 1981, but it is difficult to see the film now without being reminded of controversies in Indian public life that evolved after its release in 1989. In the same year there was a sensation in the Calcutta press as reports came from here and there avowing that idols of the god Ganesh were actually consuming milk. Although the matter was gently derided by most educated people, it made prominent headlines and occupied the media far more than ought to have been warranted by an outburst of silly superstition and hearsay. In the year of Ray's death a mosque was destroyed in order to build a temple in its place, the place being the 'birthplace' of Ram, one of the myriad Hindu gods, and this act of mob vandalism, led by a man who would become India's deputy prime minister a few years later, led to an unleashing of communal frenzy and butchery not only in India but in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. Once the right wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power, there were even moves to re-write Indian proto-history in order to make the Aryanisation of the subcontinent even more ancient and to rewrite later history in order to minimise the non-Hindu contributions to the making of Indian culture. Sporadic atrocities were committed throughout the nineties by Hindu extremists and a wave of appalling communal violence sullied the state of Gujarat in the early months of 2002. There is not much reason to believe that in many parts of India the blinkered vision and bigotry that seek to uphold questionable religious dogma is a blight of the past. Quite early in his career Ray launched an attack on religious superstition in *Devi*, set in nineteenth century Bengal; in *Ganashatru* he offers a more contemporary attack, but in a greatly inferior film. What is more significant than the quality of the film, however, is Ray's remarkable perceptiveness in discerning some very worrying trends in his contemporary India.

Ray's protagonist in *Ganashatru* is Ashok Gupta, a general practitioner in the mofussil town of Chandipur. Concerned at the growing number of people in the town suffering from serious infections such as jaundice, he alerts the local press to the problem. At first he is greeted with sympathy and support, exemplified by the desire of the printer and publisher of the local newspaper, *Janabarta,* to honour this champion of the people's health with a public felicitation. When a sample of water comes back from Calcutta labelled infectious, support for Dr Gupta's concern amazingly starts to wane. This is because the test sample had been taken, quite logically, from the most populous part of the town, in the centre of which lies the temple that is Chandipur's lucrative tourist attraction.[2] If the 'holy water' consumed by pilgrims and other visitors to the temple should be declared a health hazard, the economic consequences could be disastrous. Thus, the opposition to Dr Gupta's campaign moves from support, through cool apathy to heated hostility.

The film is a dramatised polemic in which the protagonist's case is clearly stated and then the various arguments against it are put, first by the temple owner, then by the Chairman of the Municipality, then by the press and finally by that characteristically Indian phenomenon, the hired hooligans.

The religious argument, put by the temple owner, Mr Bhargava, rests on the premise that 'holy water', by definition, cannot be impure, and that the nature of its essential purity "is beyond the understanding of medical science". The purity of this 'holy water' is ensured by the presence of Ganges water that is regularly added to it along with milk, *bel*[3] leaves, sesame seeds and, most important of all, *tulsi*[4] leaves. It is the well-worn

[2] Many temples in India enjoy one form or another of private ownership and can be highly profitable concerns.

[3] The marmelos or wood-apple tree.

[4] Holy basil or *ocimum sanctum.*

argument between fundamentalist religion and modern science. Science is suspect, of course, for being generally Western in origin; the authority of religion—that is, Hinduism—has been established by its survival through the ages. A new Western drug might be effective, but it cannot be compared in value to a herb that has been used in India for thousands of years. Reverence for antiquity readily obscures reason. What seals the argument as far as Bhargava is concerned is the fact that Dr Gupta has not been to a temple for the past ten years and so, therefore, does not understand Hindu religion. The implication in this is that his grasp of 'truth', therefore, is deficient.

Bhargava comes to Dr Gupta's office with the Chairman of the Municipality, Nisith Gupta, the doctor's younger brother. We learn from the doctor's wife that the relations between the two brothers have had a stormy history, and that Nisith is anything but the conventionally fraternal supporter of his older brother. Indeed, the Chairman's loyalties lie in Chandipur's halls of power and wealth, and these are intricately connected with the town's temple.

Haridas Bagchi, the editor of the local paper *Janabarta,* is Dr Gupta's main hope for the voice of reason to be heard. The press, of course, has a responsibility to the public especially in matters of public danger, such as a likely epidemic due to a polluted water supply. In fact, as Haridas makes clear, the press's first responsibility really is to itself. Haridas and his publisher and printer, Adhir Mukherjee, fear the propensity of their public to shoot the messenger should the paper bring unwelcome news. This is not to suggest that the public is so stupid as to revolt against a reasoned warning concerning their well-being, but rather that it is liable to be outraged at an insult to their religion, for Bhargava, Nisith and Adhir are ready to turn the issue from a caution against infection into an attack on the temple. Haridas is well enough educated to know how right Dr Gupta is in his urgent concern for the prevention of an epidemic,

but his bread is also buttered on the side favoured by the rich and powerful, and meekly he betrays Ashok Gupta and capitulates to Nisith.

There is an early indication of Haridas's doubt when he expresses his concern to Ashok about the possibility of popular panic should Ashok's article clarifying the issue be published. Later the seed of doubt is watered by the Guptas' daughter, Indrani, when she declares her mistrust of Haridas and her strong suspicion that he will weaken when it comes to actually deciding to publish the article. However, Ashok remains confident of Haridas's good faith. Before Ashok writes his article for *Janabarta*, Haridas brings Adhir Mukherjee to meet him. Adhir is the printer and publisher of the paper, without whose money it would not be produced. He comes to offer moral support to Ashok, especially in the light of letters that have been sent to him by people asserting that Dr Gupta is wrong. It is not clear who these people are and what their arguments, if that word is not an exaggeration, might be. Adhir will hover frequently on the sidelines, sitting on the fence, declaring support for Ashok so long as he does not go 'beyond the limit', whatever that may mean. His obsequiousness is enough in itself to suggest his unreliability.

Haridas also tries to make Ashok aware of the force of the opposition to his campaign, asking him who the authorities are whom he would expect to actually do something about the danger. He refers to the threats he had received from men of influence when some time back he wanted to publish something about fish dying in the town's river. He also mentions the fabulous sum of money generated daily by the temple, the town's biggest attraction, and the fact that such men of influence also have an interest in that enterprise. He then states, rather bravely, that he would like to unmask them; this is mere rhetoric on his part for, as will be seen, he does not have the courage to do this. However, he strikes a raw nerve with the simple question, "What if your

brother opposes you?" Ashok cannot believe that he would, but Ashok, good man that he is, is naïve when it comes to the ways of the world.

Janabarta officially goes with the tide that runs against Ashok after initially sympathising with his views and offering support to his campaign. It is not clear why. Certainly the link between infectious disease and the temple might well engender an emotional reaction in much of the paper's readership, although the claim of Biresh, the assistant editor, that publishing the article would do the paper more good than harm might have been considered more thoroughly by Haridas and Adhir. We might also wonder what effect Nisith has had on Haridas and the extent to which he is under the thumb of the influential men he says he would like to unmask. Biresh's sensible reasoning is eventually stopped by Haridas, who pulls rank on him and orders him back to his desk. Whatever is urging him, it would seem that to Haridas maintaining a pretence is preferable to facing up to an unwanted reality

It is very difficult to be comfortable with the cold, calculating Nisith, brilliantly played by Dhritiman Chatterjee as an embodiment of unreason, bigotry and callousness. Such people usually tend to be conservative and Nisith's right-wing credentials are established in conversation by Ashok and his wife Maya and even more firmly by himself. He suffers from indigestion, for which his brother's prescription has provided no cure, and so he is content to take *kabiraji* or traditional medicine. His faith in religion rests upon being cured—miraculously, one would assume—of spondylitis seven days after visiting a temple. Ashok agrees that his brother is very conservative by nature, but is quick to recognise his talent and the fact that he is responsible for so much of the town's prosperity. Linked with this, of course, is his partnership with Bhargava in a rice mill and a cold storage plant, so he has been responsible also for the prosperity of himself.

As far as the temple controversy is concerned, Nisith's solution is to keep it all under wraps. As Chairman of the Municipality he would see to the use of boiled water and the sinking of new tube wells so that people would not have to stop going to the temple for a time and that Chandipur's status as a place of pilgrimage would not diminish. When he learns that the controversy cannot be kept secret because of a report that has already appeared in the paper referring in general terms to a problem of water pollution, he angrily declares that Ashok should have informed him before going to the paper. Further underlining the significance of ego in this matter he adds, "The temple was *my* idea. I will not hear a word against it." And then, without the slightest hint of shame, he demands that Dr Gupta make a full and categorical retraction, denying the whole problem. Reasoned debate has no place in Nisith's scheme of things. His own values are all that matter, and nothing may threaten them in any way at all. He attacks Ashok with a letter from the Municipality blatantly calumniating him and dishonestly stating that tests have been done on the water proving it to be safe. There is obviously no concern on the part of the men in power for those who are suffering preventable illness or, worse, those likely to die from it. When Ashok intimates his intention to call a public meeting, Nisith denies him any venue in the town that comes under the auspices of the Municipality.

Nisith's callousness stems from his reverence for wealth. To repair the underground pipes would mean a great deal of public expenditure as well as the temporary closure of the temple, which then would mean a disruption to the influx of private revenue. The cost of *not* attending to these repairs along with the closure of the temple is, to Nisith, a negligible matter of other people's lives. What makes him such a frightening character is the fact that such a closed minded and cynical man can hold a public position of considerable power. Ray tells it all visually with a superbly composed shot: Ashok is arguing with Haridas

about public opinion; the camera pulls back slightly to bring Nitish's head into the right of the frame, foregrounding him even while the focus is on Ashok and Haridas; he lights one of his cigars and easily releases the smoke, sitting back smugly and in full confidence that his machinations will prevail.

The major part of the film presents the issue clearly as well as the obstacles to the efficient resolution of what would normally be a straightforward problem. The pre-titles sequence carries little cinematic appeal, focussing on one end of a telephone conversation, but it does define plainly the issue of the role of the press in regard to the particular concern. As the problem is recognised and even played around with, and as the major players are seen to take up their respective sides, a matter of grave public concern emerges. However, Ray concentrates on the microcosmic aspect of the problem, dealing only with the major players. There is reference to numbers and mention of a patient's death with the grim warning that there will be more, but as this side of the problem is ignored by the major players, it is all but neglected by Ray as well. There are a couple of scenes at the temple highlighting the throngs pressing for a few drops of a very murky 'holy' water, but no bedside shots of human suffering. The actual human aspect of the problem is quite academic, and this is a major weakness in the film. Moreover, whereas the political side of it all is played out very clearly and quite without confusion or obfuscation by technicality, it also becomes somewhat drawn out and repetitious. There is even an element of dramatic extravagance in an otherwise conventionally realistic film. Indrani hands her father a letter which he takes aside to read. Her fiancé Ramen, Maya and Haridas are also present. A glance towards her father distracts Indrani from her conversation with Haridas, and she asks her father what is in the letter. There is some twenty-five seconds before Ashok even starts to answer her question, the time being filled in by gratuitous close-ups of each of the faces in turn. This is all to announce that the temple

is at the centre of the pollution problem—a revelation that in itself is dramatic and hardly needs the clichéd sequence of close-ups to reinforce its effect. One might also wonder at the point of having Haridas nurture a romantic interest in Indrani only to reveal it and have it immediately rejected by her. It is not essential to her mistrust of him nor is there any reason to believe that it is significant in his allying himself with Nisith.

Despite these blemishes the film has established itself as an intelligent piece of social cinema. However, it is let down badly by the last two sections—the public meeting, and the reassertion of optimism at the end.

The underlying problem with the meeting section is the unrealistically malleable behaviour of the audience. Audiences at Indian public meetings usually listen very attentively but show little if any restraint in reacting to anything at all controversial. The audience at this meeting quite obviously behaves in the way that a film director has told them to. The posters advertising the meeting give notice of an address by Dr Gupta, and there is some incidental dialogue indicating that at least some members of the audience are aware of the water problem. In the light of this the way in which Nisith hijacks the meeting is unconvincing. He has no official place at the meeting, yet when he arrives he, along with Adhir Mukherjee and Haridas, proceeds to sit on the stage. Then he gets up and proposes that the meeting should have a chairman; there is no reaction from the audience. He proposes Adhir Mukherjee and, as directed, Haridas seconds the proposal. A vote is taken before any other nomination is called for, and the audience sit politely, obviously accepting this. Nisith then presumes to speak to the audience, emotively concentrating on the temple and quite clearly implying the wickedness of saying anything negative or even slightly critical about it, banking on the precedent that the slightest suggestion that religion is being insulted might well incense a multitude. Having argued thus, he moves to have Ashok prevented from speaking. The

response to this is negative although it hardly reflects the degree of agitation we might well expect and it lacks any spontaneity, given Ray's predilection in this film for 'dramatic' close-ups. There is a visually obvious division in the audience between those, mostly at the back of the hall, who are the defenders of the temple and the rest who have come to listen and, presumably, think. When Haridas comes to the microphone, there is a briefly antagonistic reaction on the part of the friends of Ramen, but this quickly dissolves into polite silence. When eventually Ashok gets to the microphone, he asks his audience if they in fact want to hear him. There is a loud affirmative response, and it too dissolves into polite silence as we see another series of close-ups: Maya, then Indrani, then Ramen, then Nisith. Basically the scene presents a well-substantiated basis for an interesting conflict between science and obscurantism, but it is diluted by its contrived and over-simplified context. Nisith might well have cooked his own goose in setting up the argument that out of something like fifteen thousand only five hundred have become sick and even fewer have died. Five hundred unnecessary illnesses is a serious figure to contend with, and not even Ramen's educated young friends jeer at the callous absurdity of Nisith's use of statistics. Indeed, the overwhelming vocal acceptance of the argument is hardly credible. What is credible, in the Bengali context, is the meeting's descent into chaos at the hands of hired hooligans. This time an opportunity to present the public point of view has, indeed, been taken up, but it has also been wasted by depicting the audience as a kind of collective puppet.

We then see the Gupta family at home. Confusion has made its mark: posters have been put up outside declaring Ashok to be a public enemy, stones are thrown through his windows, his daughter has lost her job at the school and their landlord is no longer willing to have them as his tenants. All of this is quite credible. Ashok is confronted with the chance to put everything right by a complete recantation which, needless to say, he refuses

to do, and when the gentlemen of the press, Haridas and Adhir, come obsequiously snivelling at his door he angrily throws them out. This, too, is readily acceptable. But then, in seemingly no time at all, things suddenly take a turn for the good. Biresh turns up to say that he has quit *Janabarta* and, as a freelancer, intends to give Dr Gupta all the exposure he wants. Ramen and his friends have had the controversial article printed and intend to distribute it to every home in the town; just as Ramen arrives, a crowd of his friends are heard outside the house shouting slogans of support for Ashok Gupta. It is all very heart-warming and gratifying, but it is also all too easy and simplistic. Just as the consequences of the disease had been treated somewhat academically, now the pillorying of Ashok and his family has been quickly and simply set aside. Ashok's own suffering has been so brief as to be meaningless.

Like its predecessor, *Ghare Baire,* and the two films that would follow it, *Ganashatru* is a very verbose and polemical film. In his endeavour to assure clarity in the disputation Ray has taken his film very close to over-simplification and repetition. Yet having drawn the argument out to leave no doubt at all about where any of the characters stands, Ray fails to provide any real drama or intrigue that might compensate for the surfeit of talk and minimum of action. Moreover, because of the necessary confinement of the *mise-en-scene* to what may be produced in a studio, the film has little if any visual appeal. The 'effective' close-up is only one way in which the filmmaker might underline the human sensitivities inherent in his narrative; here it is overdone to the point of cliché. Nevertheless, *Ganashatru* is a moderately good film, but one that might have been made by any one of a score of filmmakers not blessed with the talent of Satyajit Ray.

Shakha Prashakha ("Branches of a Tree", 1990) is a portrayal of family dissensions in the context of a somewhat superficial scrutiny of business morality. Like *Ganashatru* it is dense with dialogue and its visual appeal is limited with most of its action

being confined to a few rooms of the one house. It is, however, a more profound film than *Ganashatru* and, despite its obvious blemishes, it has a greater and more sustained dramatic intensity.

The opening titles move across the screen from right to left and follow a pattern suggestive of an electro-cardiogram, an indication of the heart attack that will be the catalyst for the ensuing drama. There then follows a rather long opening section in which two basic elements of the drama are established: one is the nature of the pivotal character of the film, Ananda Majumdar, and the other is the explanation for the mental derangement of his second son, Prashanta; incidental to this section are a number of snippets concerning the family's background. Ananda explains to Prashanta that today is his seventieth birthday and that later in the day there will be a public felicitation in his honour. He then goes on to explain to the disabled Prashanta the disability he incurred during a motoring accident in England many years earlier that has affected his mind and kept him from working.

One may wonder why he chooses to tell Prashanta all this about himself on this day, as though he has never broached the topic before. Indeed, this opening scene is a very theatrical piece of cinema. Whereas that which Ananda has to say to his son is really intended for the benefit of the audience – a perfectly reasonable intention, of course – the weakness lies in the presentation that makes that intention all too obvious. The nature and delivery of the dialogue and the occasional exaggerated gestures seem more in the style of a Greek choric elucidation than of realist cinema.

Also somewhat ruffling is Ray's heavy-handed direction of Soumitra Chatterjee as the mentally debilitated Prashanta. As he had employed hackneyed images of drunkenness in earlier films,[5] he comes dangerously close to interpreting mental

[5] Viz. *Parash Pathar,* the first part of *Kapurush O Mahapurush* and *Aranyer Din Ratri.*

deformity in the same trite manner. Despite the pronouncements of his older brother, Prabodh, that he should be in an asylum, there are a number of Prashanta's utterances that clearly suggest an acute intelligence and an apprehension of subtlety and innuendo; thus, the laboured gait and the exaggerated mannerisms proclaim an irrational boorishness that detracts from, rather than enhances, Prashanta's characterisation. For example, at the dining table when he is offered food, Prashanta, with childish crudity, thumps his finger-tip on his plate to express acceptance. A simple nod of the head would not be inconsistent with the character so far developed, but the clumsy signal, followed by an instance of playing with his food, actually detracts from a far more meaningful gesture some time later in Prashanta's constant banging of the table with his hand, which might otherwise have offered a profound indication of his acute frustration at not being able to articulate his immensely significant anger at the turn the conversation has taken at that point.

In regard to this deep-rooted disapproval of his brothers' business values that are being exposed at the dinner table, an exchange of dialogue in the opening scene is of interest. Ananda boasts that he has brought up all his sons with a respect for honesty and hard work and declares that therein lies the reason for their success. His reference to 'honest' and 'dishonest' money—the former being accountable while the latter is paid under the table—carries, in the context of his sons, an irony of which he cannot have any inkling. Ananda is about to cite two proverbs that he has tried to live by when Prashanta interrupts him and with laboured repetition makes the quotation for him: "Work is worship" and "Honesty is the best policy." Prashanta's enthusiasm for the two popular sayings suggests him to be closely akin to his father's ideals, while the not so subtle statement leads logically into the scene in which Ananda is publicly honoured.

The new septuagenarian is being felicitated by the citizens of the town that ten years earlier, on his sixtieth birthday, named itself Anandanagar after its highly revered citizen, Ananda

Majumdar. Thus, the speeches of adulation and the presentation of a biography of the local hero serve to enhance what we already know of the man's reputation of being honourable and impeccably honest. The significance of the two popular sayings is also underlined here. Once the unquestioned good name of Ananda has been well enough celebrated, the unexpected occurs: he suffers an acute heart attack while rising to respond to his admirers.

At the beginning of the film Ananda tells Prashanta that his three brothers will not be coming all the way to Anandanagar to celebrate his seventieth birthday (we learn later that it is a five-hour drive from Calcutta) but have sent their greetings and presents. However, their father's sudden heart attack brings them in haste to be near him. Ananda is attended by his own doctor as well as a visiting cardiologist from Ranchi and his assistant; a nurse is in attendance day and night; all appropriate equipment has been installed in the old man's room. No expense has been spared for his rehabilitation. Ray's making of this point is important, for what will render all this advanced medical expertise and technology ineffectual will not be the old man's ageing heart but a matter of money.

Before things go much further, Ray once more emphasises the exceptional quality of Ananda Majumdar. A reporter from *The Statesman* [6] has come to interview Prabodh for an article on his father. It is a simple exercise in providing information, both to the reporter and to the audience. Ananda's immense public standing is reiterated and his great ability in business and his rapid advancement in his career are also noted. Examples are given of the great man's community and charitable work, while Prabodh declares his father's over-riding quality to be his uncompromising honesty. Gradually it will become clear that the qualities of the father had not been visited on two of his sons.

[6] Still Kolkata's oldest surviving daily.

Two dramatic peaks are basic to the film's significance. One is the explanation of the unsociable reserve of Pratap, the youngest of the brothers; the other is a relentlessly frank conversation over lunch between Prabodh and the third brother, Prabir. The two sequences share a common subject matter and both aid in the full understanding of the ending, while the second is instrumental in bringing it about.

Pratap, the one unmarried of the three working brothers, comes to his father's house keeping very much to himself and having little to say except for giving bare answers to questions. When confronted by his close friend, Prabir's wife Tapati, he reveals that he has given up his very successful job and joined a professional theatre company. He is apprehensive about how his older brothers will react to the news of his changed circumstances and is particularly worried about the effect it might have on his father, for whom, we remember, work is worship. In fact, given Pratap's reasoning, his precipitate action in giving up his job—the embracing of theatre might be another matter—would be likely to win his father's approval. What has led to his resignation is his perception of corruption in his boss, Ramen, a man he had always admired. Pratap is appalled, just as his father would have been, at the currency of such things as bribery, tax evasion and 'black' or 'dishonest' money. Pratap's position is made clear by a flashback sequence which, by its nature, sits uncomfortably in the syntax of the film. Pratap confronts Ramen openly, while his concern for his boss's ill-gotten gains is underlined by a rather cheap close-up—along with a sound effect of ethereal tinkling—of Ramen's gold Rolex watch. Ramen blatantly asserts that "your father's principles" no longer carry any value and that such practices as Pratap disapproves of are now universally accepted. Prabodh later will also appeal to the "everybody-does-it" argument, both men failing to see that common practice does not imply moral rectitude.

There are two unclear aspects of Ray's treatment of Pratap's career change. First, one might wonder why he has decided to

become a professional actor. Of course, he has to do something, and theatre, something he has always loved, is perhaps as far from the distasteful world of business as he can get. Nevertheless, the point might just as cogently have been made without the alternative means of livelihood being stipulated. What is significant is the critical comment on business ethics, and Pratap's theatrical prospects tend to distract from this criticism. The second point has more to do with the form of the film. Ray has Pratap reveal his actions twice: once to Tapati, in an overly long, tediously drawn-out scene, and then again to both brothers and their wives at a picnic. The reactions of Prabodh and Prabir at the alfresco revelation hardly warrant this repetition. Having told the story once, it loses impact in being told a second time.

The warts and all revelations of Prabodh and Prabir over lunch serve to counterpoint Pratap's acute sense of ethics that had urged his resignation from his job as well as to highlight dissensions within the family. They also provide the substance for bringing about the ending of the film. It all starts innocently enough with a casual reference to the races, which leads on to a candid exposure of Prabir as a chronic gambler. Prabir does not resile from the charge, but rather aims to turn it back on Prabodh; first he gives a simple example of corruption in horse-racing and then argues that similar playing with money is part and parcel of business procedures and that Prabodh is steeped in the practice just as much as anyone. Given the evidence of Prabodh's well known opulence it is clear to Prabir that he manipulates funds as 'black' and 'white' and is a skilful tax evader. Prabir is unable to deny any of this, other than to declare, in contradistinction to one of his father's cherished proverbs, that "honesty does not pay, and you will perish if you think it does." The dialogue is well conceived and its restriction to just two characters might have created a significant element of tension were it not for the slackness of the presentation as seen in the conversational hiatuses while the camera pans around

the table. The highpoint of the drama comes, surprisingly, not from the dialogue but from Prashanta who, to the dismay of all, starts up his unrestrained striking of the table, clearly expressing his anger at the truths that have been revealed. The shots of the little boy eavesdropping in the background are also significant

The immediate upshot of this drift into unpleasantness is seen later in the day in the respective bedrooms of Prabodh and Uma and Prabir and Tapati. Uma is in tears after hearing about her husband's shady dealings. His utterly illogical assertion that inflation justifies money manipulation and his pleas that this is the way things happen in business these days—that if he did not go along with it, they would not be able to live in the style to which they have become accustomed—are obviously clutching at straws. Uma gently reminds him of whose son he is, but in an echo of Pratap's former boss he declares that notions of honesty have changed since his father's day The lofty morality of Ananda has been eclipsed by the selfish desire of Prabodh and Prabir. The prominence of this selfish desire is evident in the other bedroom too. Incidental reference is made to Prabir's petty playboy lifestyle—his drinking, gambling and philandering—although he does plead that he has been genuinely trying to reform, if only for the sake of his five-year-old son. However, his self-interest is shown most clearly in his statement that he would not need to gamble given his quarter share of his father's estate should the old man die. (We may remember, early in the film when Prabodh rings him with the news of their father's heart attack, that Prabir's immediate response is to ask, "Is he dead?") Tapati takes this statement to accuse her husband of minimal feeling for his father. Again Prabir accepts the accusation, pleading that his father never cared much for him and that it is only since he became a father himself and a success in business that he has shown any real interest in him. Prabir is his own best judge, showing himself to be just as self-interested as his eldest brother, although Prabodh strongly denies having the vices in which Prabir indulges.

Yet both men have an indifference to their own kin bordering on callousness. Prabir's lack of love for his father is foreshadowed by his refusal to see his ninety-three-year-old grandfather on the grounds of being "unable to handle senility", while Prabodh justifies his unwillingness to see him on the grounds that "He won't recognise us, so what's the point?" and declares his grandfather's existence to be a useless one. When the dotty old man suddenly appears before them all, no face looks more aghast than Prabodh's. Rather than briefly humour the old man he expresses his obvious irritation with the servant Ramdahin for letting him out as one might let out a nuisance animal. Nor does Prabodh have any patience with Prashanta, ordering Pratap to do something to stop his banging of the table and declaring a couple of times that he should be institutionalised. To Prabodh, his disabled brother and his grandfather serve no purpose and should be kept out of sight. Prabir too is quite indifferent to Prashanta and complains to Tapati about the music he listens to at high volume late at night, failing to appreciate that this is what Prashanta has become accustomed to do in his home.

Prashanta, in fact, has become cocooned in Western classical music and is at peace while listening to his records or sitting on his own and humming whatever melody may be occupying his mind. As he puts it to Pratap, music is his reason for living, the light of his darkness; it might also be said that music provides him with a defence against the world. When Pratap visits him close to midnight to the accompaniment of Gregorian chant, he comes to appreciate the essential simplicity of Prashanta's life and the great gap between it and the sullied world from which he now feels so alienated. At the picnic next day he asserts that he wants to live a simple life like Prashanta's. This perception of Prashanta is, of course, at odds with that of Prabodh, who feels that he should be closeted away, but it also begs a contrast to the life of Prabodh and its lack of integrity and to that of Prabir and its pursuit of worthless pleasure. No one would suggest that

the burden of Prashanta's disability and its consequent pain and frustration is a reasonable price to pay for the simplicity of his life, but the comparison, through Pratap, is well worth making for the sake of a clear assessment of Prabodh and Prabir as sons of a man revered for his manifold virtues.

The picnic next day serves little purpose other than to provide some visual relief from the interior of Ananda Majumdar's house. There is a superficial similarity to the picnic scene in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, even with the attempt at diversion with a round of English tongue twisters as a counterpart of the earlier film's memory game, although in contrast to the Palamau picnic the company here is marked by its disunity. The scene brings to light one or two family memories, which at this point so close to the end of the film carry little significance, a snatch of song from Tapati and a passing smile at the challenge produced by a Bengali tongue twister. The main point of the scene is the attempt to get Pratap to unburden himself of whatever it is that has kept him detached from the society of the others since they all left Calcutta. The audience, of course, already knows this and so the only possible interest lies in how the news will be received by the two older brothers.

Perhaps anticipating his subsequent grilling by Prabir, Pratap detaches himself from the rest of the company, an action that serves only to make him more prominent. In his scene with Tapati Pratap had revealed something of how the recent break-up of the Communist world had left him rather empty (the film is set in January, 1990), and now Prabir, sensing he knows what is affecting his younger brother, needles him with the question, "Do you still call yourself a Marxist?" Of course, Pratap's politics is neither here nor there, but the question does provoke an impatient dismissal from Pratap. Prabir is persistent and at last Pratap tells him what he has already told Tapati. The idealist gets the expected initial reaction from the two philistines, but later Prabodh remarks on Pratap's undeniable sincerity and Prabir

is impressed by his courage. Ultimately, however, the scene reveals nothing of much interest, while the composition, with Pratap's long moves in order to keep himself detached, minimises whatever dramatic intensity it might have had.

The ending is exceptionally well set up and played out. Ananda's little grandson, Dingu, comes to say goodbye to his grandfather, childishly boasting of the many things he knows. In the context of comic innocence the little boy inadvertently stuns the old man in declaring that he knows all about black and white money, citing the example of his father and uncle. There is a cut to the strained face of Prashanta sitting just outside the door of the old man's room. After they have all gone we see an anguished Ananda crying, "What did I hear?" While the ECG machine signals distress to the cardiologist's assistant, Prashanta goes to his father and the disabled man's worth is proclaimed by Ananda, "You are everything I have got, Prashanta." As father and son clasp hands, the old man utters a mantra for peace, and the film ends.

The ending might, indeed, have been even more memorable had it not been compromised by an unnecessary cut during its sequence to the dotty old grandfather and his infantile mouthing of the word for 'car' as he hears the departing guests drive away. Indeed, the grandfather is a notable weakness in the film, answering no discernible need at all. He is quite unable to interact with anyone and is an object of embarrassed discomfort to those with whom he comes in contact - except, of course, for Uma, who voluntarily goes to visit him. How, then, is an audience supposed to react to him? Unfortunately, because he too has been portrayed as a caricature of a geriatric joke, it would not be unreasonable for an audience to laugh at him. Certainly, when he breaks free and comes out quite unexpectedly to join the company, the looks of horror on the faces of those present in response to his gaga demeanour do in fact elicit a modicum of amusement. The same cannot be said for his second 'break out' when he confronts Pratap alone; it has been done before

and has no effect beyond the banal the second time. It could be argued that the grandfather depicts the ultimate frailty of us all, but where is the point? The film would not have lost anything by his being cut from it.

The same comment might fairly be made of the reporter from *The Statesman* who interviews Prabodh about his father's life and personal values. The role is not written to provide much for an actor—nor does it need to be—and so is of no interest in itself. The device is all too simple and somewhat hackneyed,[7] and what comes of it could easily have been provided in other parts of the dialogue. The role of Amar Dey, the assistant to the cardiologist Dr Sahay, is also gratuitous. His actual value to Ananda as patient might well have been seen to be performed by the full-time nurse, while as a character he is drawn to no degree of interest at all. He has one interchange of any substance, which is with Pratap late at night, and the most interesting thing to come of that is a comment on the good sense of giving up smoking.[8]

The film also has a number of minor blemishes that would not have been so easy to find in Ray's earlier, finer work. There are several sound effects that seem to be without point, such as the sounds of a train and later of an aeroplane, while the natural night sounds of animals howling that are heard once the volume has been turned down on the Gregorian chant are presented all too obviously. The number of English words and phrases used in this film is notably excessive. The weakness of this lies not so much in the fact that most of them could just as easily have been said in Bengali but more in the sometimes heavy Indianness of their enunciation.

[7] Rather like the use of newspaper headlines in a number of Mrinal Sen's films.

[8] There must be a higher degree in statistics waiting to be awarded to the first person to give a detailed account of the number of cigarettes, cigars and pipes smoked in Satyajit Ray's films.

The central moral conflict of the film is rather beautifully resolved in the elevation of Prashanta and, though somewhat less directly, Pratap. Those who have achieved success, in conventional worldly terms, are seen to have fallen well short of their obvious ideal, while the one who questions and stands up against worldly convention – Pratap – while not receiving the accolades from his father that are given to Prashanta, should be ascendant in the viewer's judgement. Prashanta, who has nothing to offer other than simplicity and a commitment to the integrity exemplified by his father as enunciated by his clumsy curtailment of the conversation over lunch, is embraced by his father and given categorical approval with the words, "You are my all, Prashanta." Of course, Prabodh and Prabir will go on being rich and living in luxury, and whatever moral qualms they might take away with them from their few days at their father's house will soon be dispelled. Pratap may struggle for success as an actor, he may make a happy marriage, but whatever he does he will do with a clear conscience and a strong sense of integrity. For Prashanta, life will go on as before. For the audience there is a reassuring moral lesson: the meek may not inherit the earth, but they can at least be superior people to the strong. Herein lies the film's strongest point.

The predilection for verbosity established with *Ghare Baire* and maintained in *Ganashatru* and *Shakha Prashakha* is even surpassed in Satyajit Ray's last film, *Agantuk*. It is a sad swansong for, apart from the technical efficiency one might fairly take for granted from a filmmaker of Ray's stature, there is very little at all in this film to recall any of his earlier genius.

After thirty-five years abroad an elderly man returns home to Calcutta to stay with the niece who has never seen him, his purpose being, as we eventually learn, to settle an inheritance in favour of her. There are two points of interest in the film: the mystery concerning the reason for the old man's return, an enigma that runs through most of the film, and the rather

cheap amateur detective work done in an endeavour to verify his identity, although such inquisition that takes up so much screen time is hardly necessary, as it unsurprisingly turns out, for the man is who he claims to be. Ultimately *Agantuk* is a long-winded, repetitious and didactic blanketing of a very flimsy story. It is perhaps Ray's slightest film.

The pre-titles sequence, like that of *Ganashatru*, seeks to provide the information basic to the action to follow, although unlike the corresponding sequence in *Ganashatru* it is unnecessarily drawn out. The first shot is of a letter addressed to Anila, and there is some time spent on her reading the letter; we watch as a servant crosses the room and gives a cup of tea to her husband, Sudhindra, and then more time is taken up watching their little boy, Satya, walking slowly in from the garden; Anila ignores the repeated inquiries from them both concerning the letter's sender and its contents. Eventually, after more time than is enough, Anila reveals that the letter has been sent from Delhi by her uncle, Manomohan[9] Mitra, of whom she is the only surviving relative; that the uncle left home some thirty-five years earlier, when she was just two years old; that while he sent the occasional postcard to a family friend, one Shetalbabu, there had been no communication with him in all that time; and that Manomohan Mitra is on his way to Calcutta and would like to stay with them for a week.

The news is not received positively by Sudhindra, who places several obstacles in the way of accepting the mystery uncle into their home. His first objection is that the man might very likely be an impostor, and having him in the house would put their valuable possessions at risk. Then he argues that the man's presence would be an inconvenience during the imminent Puja period and spoil their holiday time together. He also points out a number of reasons for suspicion: Anila has never seen the man or heard anything of him; he does not know her name, addressing

[9] It is not insignificant that the name means *captivating, fascinating.*

her in the letter by the universally familiar 'Khuki';[10] and his Bengali is extraordinarily good for someone who has been abroad for such a very long time. (Manomohan will later tell Anila, when she comments on how good his Bengali is after such a long time away from home, that if one does not want to, one will never forget his mother tongue. If he does want to, he can forget it within three months.[11]) Sudhindra would be happy to send a telegram proposing an assumed alibi for not being at home during the time the uncle would be with them, while Anila is averse to neglecting what may well be a responsibility of kinship hospitality. While Sudhindra's scepticism is not suppressed, Anila remains insistent that they should trust the man's good faith, at least for the time being, while Satya is excited at the prospect of a mystery uncle coming to stay.

There is a cut to a shot of a moving train, and the opening titles are displayed against images of what we may assume to be the express conveying Manomohan Mitra from Delhi to Calcutta, although the initial shots of him ignore his face, saving that for when he arrives at the house of his niece. Following the titles there is a short sequence showing Anila's supervision of arrangements for her uncle's stay, including the locking away of two very valuable bronzes on display in the living room—just in case, presumably.

Given the formal, deferential tone of Manomohan's letter and the fact that his coming to stay with his niece and her family is, to use his word, an imposition in that they have never met him and can hardly vouch for his authenticity, Manomohan might be expected to show—at least, initially—a somewhat unassuming manner. On the other hand, a confident and assertive demeanour might be more consistent with having spent the last

[10] Cf. English 'Lassie'

[11] In *Sonar Kella* Felunath remarks on how good Burman's Bengali is after the long time he claims he has been away from India and receives an almost identical reply.

thirty or more years travelling in the West, including America. What we are given is the latter, and while Manomohan charms Anila and excites Satya, his manner will not immediately endear him to many. Indeed, in what follows there will be many instances of his self-assertiveness bordering on arrogance, even aggressiveness. A gentler, more likeably avuncular Manomohan might have made for a more appealing film.

No one, it seems, finds Manomohan more interesting than he himself does. He is clearly in his element being the centre of attention and quite comfortable being an object of scrutiny. However, he is instantly adored by Satya, and quite wonderfully entertains him and several of his young friends with tales of Machipichu and a lesson on basic astronomy. He disarms Sudhindra completely in seeing himself as he suspects Sudhindra sees him. He does not allow Sudhindra to touch his feet in respect before he "rids himself of doubt" concerning his unexpected guest, and he offers his passport to Sudhindra before his host even mentions it, only to snatch it from him and to ask aggressively, "What does it prove, seeing passports can so easily be forged!" All of this goes a long way to dispelling Sudhindra's scepticism, though he still has doubts emanating from the old man's long absence from his home and family.

When asked over lunch about his departure from India thirty-five years earlier, Manomohan gives Anila two reasons: wanderlust and bison. The mention of wanderlust is an example of what will come to be seen as his characteristic showing off. (A little later he says "Auf wiedersehen" to Satya, and on the basis of *wanderlust* and *auf wiedersehen* Anila will tell Sudhindra that he knows German!) The bison reason is more interesting. Manomohan tells Anila that when he was an art student he once came across a picture in a magazine of a cave painting of a bison dating from Alta Mira some thirty thousand years ago, and it was this superb exploitation of the art of line that deterred him from further art studies. More important, the realisation

that came from seeing this sample of prehistoric art brought him into what had become a lifelong fascination with what is civilised and what is uncivilised. It is an interesting idea and will be reiterated in various ways later in the film. However, it is a pity that its introduction is cheapened by the gimmick of the picture in question temporarily filling the screen, for such a device gives an all too obvious formal prominence to an idea in a way that is not consistent with anything similar in the rest of the film.

Although Sudhindra concedes after his initial meeting with Manomohan that the uncle is genuine, his doubt is not completely dispelled. He assures Anila that the following night his lawyer friend Pritish, who apparently has had much experience with cheats and charlatans, will come to put their guest to the test. In the meantime Ray puts his audience to the test with a trivial interlude that gives the popular funny man, Rabi Ghosh, the opportunity to play Robi Ghosh. This is facilitated by Ray's writing the character as a professional comedian, Ranjan Raxit, who, with his wife, pays a visit to their friends spurred by curiosity about their mysterious guest. After a little initial 'comedy' based on some hammed up confusion, the conversation then proceeds to the inevitable question: How do you find Calcutta after so many years? Manomohan refers to the remarkable physical development of the city, particularly its architectural advances, while observing that there are still men pulling rickshaws. It is an interesting answer that begs for some development, but given the company it is quickly trivialised and glossed over. The notion of deprivation is picked up again, this time with Manomohan making Ghosh's trademark eyes fatuously widen to their limit with a comment on homelessness in New York, and then, mentioning that he has come from Brazil, Manomohan is a little surprised to see the conversation turn to soccer by means of an implication of Pele, the Brazilian soccer star of former times, giving another instance of trivialisation.

The conversation then moves to what the Bengalis regard as an especially Bengali institution, *adda*.[12] Manomohan is quick to point out that *adda* is not unique to Bengal and that the practice is at least as old as the Greeks, and this gives him a chance to again show off another smattering of his knowledge. The move, more for the sake of it than for any syntactical reason, is an awkward one, having Manomohan rise from his seat and walk in a vertical line to the camera, forward and back, necessitating his constant turning back to look at the people to whom he is speaking. It is obviously not a comfortable move even for an actor as competent as Utpal Dutt. Then, after an inconsequential skit by Ranjan based on puns on political terminology, the scene ends with the focus blatantly on egoism as Manomohan asks, "What do you think of me?" He claims to know that he is the centre of interest and attention and that the interest that he has stirred up is the reason why Ranjan and his wife have come to visit their friends. Sudhindra and Anila are visibly embarrassed, yet what Manomohan thinks he is exposing is perfectly understandable. However, it is clear by now that any degree of personable humility does not come naturally to him.

There is a welcome break away from the house when Sudhindra visits the aged lawyer of Anila's grandfather to try to find out if Manomohan has any entitlements under the terms of his late father's will. It turns out that he does, but to get to this illumination there is a period of poor comedy based on the old man's deafness. At least the scene offers a visual diversion.

While the scene with the Raxits offers some eleven minutes of nothing of any real significance, the scene with Sudhindra's lawyer friend, Nitish, runs for more than twenty minutes – in the same room, around the same table, with much the same moves, but with Manomohan's academic pretentiousness swelled even more. Indeed, it can be said that by now the role has been

[12] In its simplest form, the word denotes a group of men talking. The quality of the *adda* of course, depends on the quality of the conversation.

played out; the character's perimeters have been reached and there can only be more of the same.

The scene opens with Manomohan admiring the bronzes, now returned to their display in the living room, and other items from the rich collection of Sudhindra's father, perhaps whetting the suspicion of Sudhindra's friend, Nitish, who is seated in an armchair watching him. The dialogue is structured as though the action were in a courtroom: Nitish proposes a question, Manomohan offers a response, Nitish examines the ramifications and Manomohan expostulates further, and then the process is repeated. It is all rather academic and very dry. The opening topic is religion, but discussion is deferred as Manomohan wants to hear a song from his niece, who proceeds to sing a song of Tagore in which the Poet sings of some wonderful breath of fresh air animating his life.[13] There are the characteristically poetic expressions, such as the Poet's heart awakening like a lotus in the morning, which in these circumstances especially should not be taken at all literally. However, the simple point of the song is to rejoice in the advent of something new and splendid. "From where has the breeze brought this new awakening, removing the veil from my life?" Maybe there is an intended irony in the fact that this 'breath of fresh air' should be stirring up so much doubt, mistrust and, now, even acrimony. However, while the gist of the song might relate, at least tenuously, to a relatively unknown guest, the profound effect of that advent felt by the Poet is hardly applicable to the Bose family, not even Anila. During the early lines of the song the camera pans over some of their artefacts to evoke an impression of India's ancient cultural splendour, something with which Manomohan in no way identifies. The shot and indeed the song itself are quite gratuitous, providing, if anything, a brief respite from the turgidity into which the film has descended. There is a hiatus, as there is in the scene with the

[13] *Bajila kahar vina.*

Raxits, while the camera focuses on servants bringing tea and biscuits, and then Manomohan, at the urging of Nitish, is restored to his soapbox. Religion and caste now are declared to be agents of division among mankind, while God might seem to merit some worthiness if the two lines of song sung by Manomohan offer anything more than religious cliché – "God is light to the blind, God is life to the dead." It is Nitish's implication of praise for modern technology that prompts Manomohan to challenge him, first of all with a clumsy and melodramatic reference to the injection of narcotic poisons into young bodies. This brings Manomohan to a spirited proclamation of the worthiness of tribal life in all its simplicity, delivered again during an uncomfortable vertical perambulation. To the question, "Have you lived with tribals?" the dramatic propensity drips from Manomohan's response, "Have you ever eaten field rats? Snakes? Monkeys?" There are then questions concerning Manomohan's financial resources and these too give him the opportunity to foreground himself. The clear design in all of Manomohan's rhetoric is not to engage in any rational discussion but to assert himself as an object of interest. Of course, it can be argued that Manomohan senses that he is being interrogated and is simply playing at being one up on his interrogator. That was so in the scene with the comedian and makes sense if it is the case here. However, the intention fails as didactic pomposity now dominates; once the scene has reached its disconcertingly ham-fisted conclusion, one feels a sense of relief, not only from Manomohan's egoism but also from Nitish's arrogance. We might also note with strained credulity Nitish's absurd hyperbole in accusing Manomohan of cruelly causing loss of sleep to Anila and Sudhindra and, as he is leaving, his declaration to Sudhindra that Manomohan "is not fit to live in civilised society". The descent into shamed silence and Manomohan's secret departure during the night are as effective a means as any in tidying up such a verbal mess.

They find Manomohan in a Santal village not far from Bolpur where his friend Setalbabu points Sudhindra and Anila in his direction. Happily it would seem that Manomohan's self-assertiveness has spent itself and that he is also ready to forgive, especially as his hosts, including the adoring Satya, have driven all the way from Calcutta to find him.[14] He stands on his dignity only a little in insisting that he will not come back until after a dance programme that he has arranged, and then there follows the last major weakness of the film. The form of the dance is repetitious and does not need the time that is given over to it; however, just as it seems that at last it might end, Anila is moved to hitch up her sari and join the tribal chorus line. It is, of course, an acknowledgement of Manomohan's respect for tribal culture, but whatever may be the point of that is not made clear, and the gesture and its context lack any semblance of significance.

There is, however, a heart-warming ending to the film, as Manomohan, having recovered from his emotional bruising by Nitish, magnanimously fulfils his purpose in coming to Calcutta. Grandly denying himself the luxury of gratitude from his niece—who still, after all, barely knows him—he presents them with an envelope and hurries into the waiting taxi and away to the airport. The envelope contains an expression of extreme generosity on Manomohan's behalf and, in the light of their reception of him, especially Sudhindra's scepticism, provokes an uncomfortable feeling of guilt in Anila and her husband. Generosity, of course, would minimise egoism, and in his parting gesture Manomohan is magnified in a way we had not really been able to appreciate earlier.

The self-denying loftiness of the now departed Manomohan only momentarily supersedes the self-assertive pedant who has been the centre of the film's attention in almost all its scenes.

[14] Bolpur is a little over 200 kilometres from Calcutta and, given the state of the roads, the drive would take nearly five hours.

However, the unexpected visitor has been able, at least temporarily, to assume a degree of meekness, and Sudhindra and, by extension, the arrogant Nitish have been obliged to assume a degree of humility. It would seem that a degree of moral justice has prevailed.

Biographers of Satyajit Ray would, no doubt, want to place the last three films in the context of his deteriorating health, seeking to explain or even excuse their shortcomings by an appeal to worsening physical frailty. The role of the biographer and the role of the critic are, it must be stressed, different. While a particular life experience might add interest to a certain work of art, ultimately that work must stand independent of the artist and the story of his life. We can recognise and appreciate great works of art while knowing little or nothing about their creators.

To some it might seem callous to end a book on the works of a truly great filmmaker saying nothing adulatory about his last three films. However, as long as none of those works can be critically justified as belonging in the same class as, let us say, *Charulata* or *Aparajita*, then no amount of pretending with unsubstantiated praise will effect such an equation. It would be an injustice to Ray—indeed, it would be an offence—to equate the demonstrably least with the demonstrably best of his work. Ray's greatness is in no way diminished by these last three films, for the masterpieces will always be there to maintain his magnitude.

11 Some Final Remarks

Satyajit Ray spoke and wrote English with near perfection. He was well educated in English literature and, before taking to filmmaking, had embarked on a career in graphic art with an English firm. From a young age he had pursued a love of Western classical music and, by his adult years, had become exceptionally knowledgeable in the subject. Even his early interest in filmmaking was stimulated and sustained by Western, especially Hollywood, cinema.[1] Yet for all this Ray was undeniably a characteristically Indian filmmaker.

In style and in content his films herald a distinctness from the Western models which had meant so much to him as an aficionado of cinema and as a student, largely self-taught, of the techniques of filmmaking over the twenty or so years before *Pather Panchali*. In a number of outward appearances Ray's films are not so greatly different from those of the West, but aesthetically they are imbued with a distinctly Indian nature.

[1] See *My Years with Apu*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1994, Chapter 1.

One of the more obvious emanations of this is in the pace of his films. It is said that the great French director, François Truffaut, complained of the slowness of *Pather Panchali*, and yet many would regard the restrained pace of this and many of Ray's films to be essential to their cinematic genius.

In Western culture time is very much a linear concept: it is seen as moving *from* something *to* something else. Birthdays and other anniversaries are marked in Western countries with much greater frequency and attached importance than they are in India. As distinct from the Hindu notion of a primal age when everything was perfect, Western culture looks forward to bigger and better things to come. Schoolchildren are taught to write compositions with a beginning, a middle and an end, and if a Western piece of music ended on the subdominant, it would be greeted with similar dismay to that which Forster's Professor Godbole faced when he sang an Indian song to some English visitors.[2] In Indian culture time is perceived more as being cyclic, especially as expressed by Krishna's "Never have I not been, never hast thou . . . not been; and never shall time yet come when we shall not all be."[3] Clear-cut beginnings and endings, commonplace in Western culture, do not appear to be so essential in India.

To some extent the passion for action in Western films can be explained by this linear notion of time along with the contrivance of temporal progression.[4] It might also be suggested that a more Indian notion of time pays greater respect to time itself, seeking not so much to manipulate and assert control over it by editing processes, but rather accepting that actions actually evolve through time. There are countless directors who could make a western-

[2] E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, Chapter 7.

[3] *Bhagavadgita*, Lesson the Second, 12, in Nicol Macnicol, ed., *Hindu Scriptures*, London, 1938.

[4] While there is also a passion for action in Indian commercial films, it probably warrants a different explanation.

style, action-packed movie on Premchand's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* or Tarashankar's *Ashani Sanket,* for example. By comparison, in Ray's versions of these stories nothing much at all happens. What is of supreme importance is the manner of the evolution of whatever action there is to allow for and to make sense of so much that happens off screen. In one film it is the machinations of great men of affairs and their power politics, remote and even alien to the relatively frivolous enterprises of ordinary men; in the other it is the unapprehended, insidious advance of an unknowable abstract and its trampling over all the known rules of social order. The unhurried pace of the Apu trilogy allows for the sustaining of essential emotional development that might otherwise be eclipsed by a predilection for action. One of the most profoundly meaningful passages in the whole of Indian cinema is the lengthy opening sequence of *Charulata* with its absence of dialogue and any significant action. To quicken the pace or to make more intricate the plot in *Sadgati* would be self-defeating in that it would effectually minimise both the tension in the mind of Dukhi as well as his growing physical stress. It would also dilute the acute affront to the senses of the viewer which comes from Ray's clinical presentation of this story of the death of an insignificant man

The content of Ray's films is also notably Indian. Even in the most 'modern' and overtly 'universal' of his work – the films of the Calcutta triptych – the major character is the city itself, remarkably different from any Western city. Moreover, Ray's Indianness is inflected by his being quintessentially a Bengali. All but two of his twenty-nine films are in Bengali, and to a very large extent he draws on masters of Bengali literature for his stories. His films are peopled with Bengalis with Bengali values and set, for the most part, in his home state of West Bengal. Thus, throughout most of his work there is a prominence of rural Bengal and Calcutta, and of issues pertaining to them. It is worth noting, however, that in his two volumes of Feluda

adventures Ray, in order to stimulate his younger readers' awareness of their nation beyond the boundaries of their own state, has his three Bengali companions travel to various parts of India.[5] Thus, in the first of the two Felunath films Ray prompts an incidental wonder at the splendour of India's Rajput past as he takes us to some of the fortresses of Rajasthan, while in the second the setting is the holiest of Indian cities, Benares, which had made a brief though memorable appearance in *Aparajita.* The most notable of his non-Bengali settings, perhaps, is his superb representation of nineteenth century Lucknow and the court of its sadly ill-used king.

Apart from the heavy-handed attempt in his last film, *Agantuk*, to evoke an element of wonder in things and ideas international, the content of Ray's films remains distinctly Indian. The issue of national identity is overtly introduced in a number of films. In *Kanchanjungha* the disputation between Indranath Roy and the young Ashok exposes the anti-nationalism of many made rich by their collaboration with the former colonial rulers. In *Seemabaddha* there is ample evidence, within the domain of Hindusthan Peters, of the lingering fawning on Englishmen and English values that would militate against a strong Indian national identity, while the unexpected arrival of Shyamalendu's parents, in national dress, spontaneously implies a preferred alternative to the posing and posturing of their son's friends. Ray does not take any kind of a political stance in *Ashani Sanket*, though there is the inferred awareness by the viewer of the Bengali masses as the innocent victims of a callous foreign government. In *Charulata* the 'lonely wife' identifies with Bengali writers, as distinct from her husband's literary and political Anglophilia, while notions of nationalism under the imperialist yoke are the essence of *Ghare Baire.*

Many of Ray's films look at traditional issues critically. Often this submission to critical evaluation is done simply by the

[5] There are also travels to Nepal and one even to Hong Kong.

tension implied by mere presentation: for example, the traditionally held respect for the vocation of the priestly Brahman becomes questionable when it is seen as the root cause of the material distress of Harihar's wife and family. Tradition is openly questioned first in *Aparajita*, when Apu declares his wish to go to school, consigning his work as a priest to part-time status and, soon enough, letting it drop altogether. In *Jalsaghar* and *Devi* tradition comes into conflict with modernity, yet the tension with modernity serves merely to highlight the need for reform of something in itself undesirable: Biswambhar's excessive pride is worthy of censure whether he has any money or not, and Kalikinkar's obsession with idolatry and its superstitious ramifications can never have any constructive or progressive outcome. In *Mahanagar* the clash between tradition and modernity would seem to amount almost to an issue between pigheadedness and common sense. *Mahanagar* is a very persuasive critique of traditional values about women and of the growing irrelevance of those values in a modern society. However, the most biting of Ray's critiques of Indian tradition is *Sadgati*, a film in which tradition is seen not just as outdated but downright wicked. The perversity of Kalikinkar's beliefs is made abundantly clear in *Devi*, but the fond and foolish old man is spared the obvious contempt that Ray pours on the Brahman, Ghasiram, in *Sadgati*. Extracted from the mediocre film that sustains it, there is in *Ganashatru* a very cogent argument against the corruption of tradition, and while the story is really Ibsen's, not Ray's, Ray has adapted it to the Indian condition exceptionally well to attack those who would seek to use religion as a smokescreen to their own nefarious schemes of self-advancement. Although most of these films are set prior to the time in which they were first seen, there is nothing in the thrust of any of them that can be said to have little or no bearing on present realities.

Ray does address present realities specifically, of course. In his philosophy women quite clearly have an equal right with men

to whatever society has to offer. The question of a woman's right to decide on her future is a prominent one in *Kanchanjungha*, while in *Mahanagar* the quaint fustiness of the time-honoured value that would maintain a woman in domestic shackles is exposed for its inherent absurdity. As well as questioning the tradition of women's subjection to men, Ray also looks at the tradition of the younger generation necessarily deferring to the older. Again this issue is raised in both *Kanchanjungha* and *Mahanagar*; most adequately in the former by the young Ashok in rejecting the patronising overtures of Indranath Roy, and in *Mahanagar* by demonstrating the indignity of Priyagopal going cap in hand to his former students in the belief that they owe him a debt of more than mere gratitude, a belief that they do not all share. However, it is in the three Calcutta films that Ray asserts most strongly his sympathy for the younger generation, many of whom are steeped in despair, having been failed by their elders. We might also note that the ending of *Ganashatru* sees the younger people taking up the cudgels on behalf of the cruelly maligned Dr. Gupta against elders with selfish vested interests; similarly, in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* the hope of tomorrow is seen in the young boys and their idealistic teacher.

Ray's attitude toward the Naxalites and their turbulent movement is of considerable interest. The movement was indeed a violent one, as the would-be revolutionaries derived most of their philosophy from the revolutionary thought of Mao Tse-tung. They pursued a campaign of selected assassinations as well as causing indiscriminate loss of life in random bomb blasts, while the police reaction was concerted and often extravagant; there were, indeed, sickening excesses on both sides. It would be easy to expect a man of culture and humanity like Satyajit Ray to be opposed to such a socially disruptive movement, which employed violence as a major means to its end and, in turn, provoked violence from the state in putting it down. What is of concern here, however, is the attitude that is conveyed in the

films, specifically the three Calcutta films, *Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya.*

The films of the Calcutta triptych are not *about* Naxalism; rather, Naxalism is represented here as a symptom of something more pervasive and deep-rooted. Indeed, it is almost as though Ray makes his point in *Pratidwandi*, in which most attention is given to the movement; then, in *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya* he gives merely a few reminders of its actuality. To make us aware of the violence there is the bomb blast in the cinema hall visited by Siddhartha and the surface wound sustained by Tunu in *Pratidwandi* and, in *Seemabaddha,* the few, occasional sounds of gunfire. Ray's interest, however, is more on the reaction to the Naxalites. The one Naxalite in the triptych, Tunu, is remarkably tight-lipped, even to his own brother, about the movement and his role in it, so we have no primary source of information, so to speak. Tunu is depicted, however, not as a thug or a destructive misfit, bent on brainlessly wrecking the world in which he lives. Ray presents him as an intelligent young man, apparently with a social conscience, who single-mindedly goes about fulfilling what he sees to be his responsibilities, acknowledging the reality of the likelihood of getting killed in the process. It is this attitude that is singled out and admired in *Jana Aranya* by Somnath's elderly father and not evidently understood by his elder son. It is interesting to compare the characters of Tunu, steadfast throughout *Pratidwandi*, and Somnath as he appears at the end of *Jana Aranya*, now corrupted by commerce. In *Seemabaddha* the way in which the leaders of commerce are portrayed would seem to make them worthy enemies of such young men as Tunu, just as the representatives of the senior generation are seen in *Pratidwandi* and *Jana Aranya* as unworthy leaders of society. (In his second last film, *Shakha Prashakha*, Ray would make one last attack on the captains of industry for their corruption and venality.)

From a reading of the films there is no reason at all to suppose that Ray approved of bombs and bullets and bashings. However,

it is perfectly plain that he felt very strongly about the exclusive self-interest of a social leadership in moral decline, just as he did about the unselfishness of idealistic youth embittered at their betrayal by an ethically vacuous older generation. These general principles are all that matter; any discussion about police excesses or corruption among the insurgents would not be about Ray's films. What is lamented in the Calcutta triptych is not the Naxalite Movement but the society that had provoked its emergence.

In 1975, as the movement was starting to burn out, the Prime Minister, in what became known infamously to history as the Emergency, unleashed an orgy of state excesses, suspending the Constitution and trampling on all democratic ideals that posed an impediment or potential impediment to her unrivalled power. In 1980 Ray sought to offer a reminder of the horrible consequences inherent in a surfeit of political power without the restraints of constitutional democracy in his last film for the young, *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The anti-authoritarianism is obvious, though it is a pity that such an important expression of social philosophy had to be conveyed in such a negligible film.

Finally, it is appropriate to consider the essential humanity of the man who made the films discussed in this book. There are no larger than life characters in Ray's films, and perhaps the best indication of his interest in ordinary humanity and its inherent shortcomings over the great deeds of exceptional men and women is the fact that there are very few heroes in his films, and the status of most of them is indeed questionable. The most obvious heroes are to be found in his four films for the young—Goopy, Bagha and Feluda. The storybook nature of the two Goopy and Bagha films demands a conflict between good and evil, and a conflict implies heroes and villains. Goopy and Bagha are not so much ambassadors for good as they are, especially through their magic, resisters of evil. Felunath's mission in life, without the magic powers of Goopy and Bagha, is to apprehend villains and, as far as is possible, restore to health lives that have

been damaged by crime. He is a man remarkable for the power of his intellect and the strength of his character, yet although he is utterly credible, he is also something of a rarity.

The most prominent hero in Ray's work is Apu, yet he is very much a tainted one. From an early age he follows the urging of his heart and, in his pursuit of learning and his rejection of the tradition that would programme his future for him, he asserts his personhood as a self-reliant and self-sufficient individual. He overcomes poverty, ignorance and prejudice and the restrictions of a parochial way of life, finding at last the freedom to follow the promptings of his own inner man. Yet there are times when his individualism spills over into selfishness and he hurts those who love him. Utterly bound up in himself, he even denies a bond with his own son for the first few years of the boy's life. Arindam Mukherjee, in *Nayak*, may also lay claim to being a hero. Of course, in popular film parlance he is a 'hero' in the sense of 'leading actor'; as a man, he too has much to recommend him. He has made a reputation for himself solely on his own ability and hard work but, in the process, he too has hurt people who have loved him. He is a womaniser, and he probably drinks too much, largely because of the need to forget his demons. Nevertheless, Arindam's saving quality is the fact that he does at least have a conscience. In the greater social context which the journalist, Aditi, is able to perceive, he is a lightweight, but he does have characteristics that are endearing and, to some extent, admirable. Narsingh's claim to hero status in *Abhijan* is meagre though not negligible. Symbolically, at least, he does play the knight in shining armour, after being led to renounce what could have been a profitable enterprise in shady deals. He is a proud character, even arrogant and aloof, yet a man with a strong sense of basic decency. In his own environment, he is indeed a cut above the rest. More admirable than either Arindam or Narsingh is Arati in *Mahanagar*, a woman who challenges the traditional strictures of domesticity not for any political reason but purely out of love for her family. She is able, hard-working

and devoted, and when conflict must be resolved, she is prepared to take a stand on sound moral principle. For most of the time in *Ashani Sanket* Gangacharan is nothing much more than a humble village Brahman, perhaps a half century behind his times. It is when hardship comes with appalling severity that he is able to acknowledge a challenge to his hold on traditional beliefs, the most significant one of which he renounces in the cause of simple humanity. Never a hero in any real sense of the word, Gangacharan becomes one in a moment of triumph at the end of the film.

Prominent in Ray's field of interest are those whose frailty makes them fall victim to more powerful forces. Sarbajaya is very much the epitome of such characters. A victim of poverty and her dilettante of a husband, she becomes subject to a son whose growing up she can only wonder at but never understand. Ray's direction and Karuna Banerjee's superb acting are remarkably effective in inspiring a profound pity for this hapless yet representative rural woman. It is also reasonable to feel a degree of pity for Biswambhar in *Jalsaghar*. His pride and arrogance are by no means endearing qualities, but it is not too hard to see through the aristocratic façade to a man who is quite unable to belong to the times in which he is obliged to live. Rather than getting his just deserts for his arrogance, Biswambhar falls victim to his own human frailty.

There are also victims who are manipulated, the most prominent being Dayamayee in *Devi*, while in *Ghare Baire* Bimala is skilfully manipulated by the uncompromising Sandip. In *Ganashatru* the strongly ethical Ashok Gupta is bullied close to submission—albeit, we might assume, temporarily—by a motley crew of men: some cunning, some stupid, some craven. Although Bimala eventually acknowledges the perverse designs of Sandip, she hardly evokes pity, except, perhaps, on the occasion of the death of Nikhil, and as Dr Gupta's ostracism promises to be a passing hardship, he too hardly evokes pity. *Devi* is an infinitely superior film to both *Ghare Baire* and *Ganashatru*, and so too is

the character of Dayamayee more profound and complex than any in those later films. The frightening psychological transformation that comes over the simple and good Dayamayee by the power of a perverse sense of religion, and which ultimately brings about her destruction, makes her an extraordinarily pitiable character. The most pitiable of all of Ray's characters is, no doubt, the representative of the vast masses of oppressed and mistreated Dalits, Dukhi in *Sadgati*. Ray makes it clear that Dukhi's suffering is institutionalised and deeply embedded in Hindu tradition, and that it is his innate sense of his own inferiority and contemptibility that makes him so docilely subject to the outrages of the privileged. Here the pity is so intense that it turns into outrage.

Ghasiram, the Brahman bully who works Dukhi to death, is significant among Ray's characters as being the one who most evokes a sense of disgust in his audience and who most clearly warrants blame and condemnation from all quarters, not only from the Gond. Generally, it must be said, Ray is rarely ever willing to point the finger of blame, letting the unkindness and hurt of some toward others be interpreted as marks of frailty themselves. Kalikinkar, the doting yet foolish old man who sees divinity in his daughter-in-law, is utterly unable to see the danger of his perceptions, and hence he suffers as much as anyone the horrible consequences of his ignorance. In *Kanchanjungha* Ray restrains the pompous Indranath from becoming a villain who manipulates his own daughter's life in the interest of his own pride. Rather than give him any come-uppance, however, it is enough for Ray to let this would-be bully subside into irrelevance. He does the same for a much less worthy character, Sukhanram, the shady dealer in *Abhijan*. In *Mahanagar,* Priyagopal, too, is shown to be out of place in changing times, and there is even a sense at the end of the film that he might have more than an inkling of this himself. The real villain in *Shatranj Ke Khilari* is the Governor-General, Lord

Dalhousie, and yet he appears in the film only in effigy and is represented by General Outram. Outram carries out his instructions, as military and political functionaries are obliged to do, yet Ray blesses even him with an obvious sense of distaste at the moral shortcoming of his superior and a feeling of remorse at the invidious role for which history would remember him. And then there are Birinchi Baba and his assistant, two rogues who actually get away with it, and will continue to as long as there are religiously gullible people on whom they might profitably prey.

Satyajit Ray deserves his paramount reputation among Indian filmmakers. Throughout his long career he led a team of masters in the various aspects of the art of filmmaking – most notable among them were the cameramen Subrata Mitra and Soumendu Roy, the editor Dulal Dutta, who was with Ray from the beginning of his career right through to the end, and the art directors Bansi Chandragupta and Ashok Bose; hence it has always been reasonable to expect a high degree of technical polish from a Satyajit Ray film, even a lesser one. As well as leading his team of eminent practitioners Ray gathered together some of the finest available actors, obtaining from them in many films performances of the highest order. He also had a genius for casting, which once or twice let him down, but which generally saw the best actor in the appropriate role. Ray was an excellent writer, and his screenplays for those of his films based on his own stories or, in the majority of his films, for his adaptations of stories by others, present absorbing tales imbued with depth and layers of significance. He was an incisive interpreter of his country's past, just as he was an acute and candid commentator on its present. He was a consummate Indian filmmaker, looking to India for his content and finding in Indian rhythms and forms the essence of the style that marks his work. Finally, what makes Ray ascend into the realms of the great is his profound sense of humanity. On top of all his other qualities, he was indeed a compassionate filmmaker.

Filmography

Pather Panchali ("Song of the Road")
1955, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Ravi Shankar
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Government of West Bengal
Cast includes: Kanu Banerjee, Karuna Banerjee, Subir Banerjee, Uma Das Gupta, Chunibala Devi, Runki Banerjee, Reba Devi, Aparna Devi, Tulsi Chakravarti.

Aparajita ("Unvanquished")
1956, Bengal, b & w
Based on the novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Ravi Shankar
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Epic Films
Cast includes: Kanu Banerjee, Karuna Banerjee, Pinaki Sen Gupta, Smaran Ghosal, Santi Gupta, Ramani Sen Gupta, Ranibala, Sudipta Roy, Ajay Mitra, Charuprakash Ghosh, Subodh Ganguli, Moni Srimani, Hemanta Chatterjee, Kali Banerjee, Kalicharan Roy, Kamala Adhikari, Lalchand Banerjee, K. S. Pandey, Meenaksi Devi, Anil Mukherjee, Harendrakumar Chakrabarti, Bhaganu Palwan.

Parash Pathar ("The Philosopher's Stone")
1958, Bengali, b & w
Based on the short story by Parashuram

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Ravi Shankar
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Promod Lahiri
Cast includes: Tulsi Chakravarti, Ranibala, Kali Banerjee, Gangapada Bose, Haridhan, Jahar Roy, Bireswar Sen, Moni Srimani

Jalsaghar ("The Music Room")
1958, Bengali, b & w
Based on the short story by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Vilayat Khan
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta

Produced by: Satyajit Ray Productions
Cast includes: Chhabi Biswas, Padma Devi, Pinaki Sen Gupta, Gangapada Bose, Tulsi Lahiri, Kali Sarkar, Waheed Khan, Roshan Kumari

Apur Sansar ("The World of Apu")
1959, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel, *Aparajita*, by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Ravi Shankar
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Satyajit Ray Productions
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Sarmila Tagore, Alok Chakravarti, Swapan Mukherjee, Dhiresh Majumdar, Sefalika Devi, Dhiren Ghosh.

Devi ("The Goddess")
1969, Bengali, b & w
Based on the short story by Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Ali Akbar Khan
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Satyajit Ray Productions
Cast includes: Chhabi Biswas, Sooumittra Chatterjee, Sarmila Tagore, Purnendu Mukherjee, Karuna Banerjee, Arpan Chowdhury, Anil Chaterjee, Kali Sarkar, Nagendranath Kabyabyakarantirtha, Santa Devi.

Teen Kanya ("Three Daughters")
1961, Bengali, b & w
Based on three short stories of Rabindranath Tagore: *Postmastar*, *Monihara*, *Samapti* .

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Satyajit Ray Productions
Cast includes: *Postmaster*: Anil Chatterjee, Chandana Banerjee. *Monihara*: Kali Banerjee, Kanika Majumdar, Kumar Roy, Gobinda Chakravarti. *Samapti*: Soumitra Chatterjee, Aparna Das Gupta, Sita Mukherjee, Gita Dey, Santosh Dutta, Mihir Chakravarti, Devi Neogy.

Kanchenjungha
1962, Bengali, Colour

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: NCA Productions
Cast includes: Chhabi Biswas, Anil Chatterjee, Karuna Banerjee, Anubha Gupta, Subrata Sen, Sibani Singh, Alaknanda Roy, Arun Mukherjee, N. Viswanathan, Pahari Sanyal.

Abhijan ("The Expedition")
1962, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy

Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Abhijatrik
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Waheeda Rehman, Ruma Gula Thakurta, Ganesh Mukherjee, Charuprakash Ghosh, Robi Ghosh, Arun Roy, Sekhar Chatterjee, Ajit Banerjee, Reba Devi, Abani Mukherjee

Mahanagar ("The Big City")
1963, Bengali, b & w
Based on the short story, *Abataranika* by Narendranath Mitra

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: R. D. Bansal and Co.
Cast includes: Anil Chatterjee, Madhabi Mukherjee, Jaya Bhaduri, Haren Chatterjee, Sefalika Devi, Prasanjit Sarkar, Haradhan Banerjee, Vicky Redwood.

Charulata
1964, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novella, *Nastanir*, by Rabindranath Tagore

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: R. D. Bansal and Co.
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Madhabi Mukherjee, Sailen Mukherjee, Shyamal Ghosal, Gitali Roy, Bholanath Koyal, Suku Mukherjee, Dilip Bose, Subrata Sen Sharma, Joydeb, Bankim Ghosh

Kapurush O Mahapurush ("The Coward and the Holy Man")
1965, Bengali, b & w
Based on the short stories, *Janaiko Kapurusher Kahini*, by Premendra Mitra, and *Birinchi Baba*, by Parashuram

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: R.D. Bansal and Co.
Cast includes: *Kapurush*: Soumitra Chatterjee, Madhabi Mukherjee, Haradhan Banerjee. *Mahapurush*: Charuprakash Ghosh, Robi Ghosh, Prasad Mukherjee, Gitali Roy, Satindra Bhattacharya, Somen Bose, Santosh Dutta, Renuka Roy.

Nayak ("The Hero")
1966, Bengali, b & w

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Subrata Mitra
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: R. D. Bansal and Co.
Cast includes: Uttam Kumar, Sarmila Tagore, Bireswar Sen, Somen Bose, Nirmal Ghosh, Premangshu Bose, Sumita Sanyal, Ranjit Sen, Bharati Devi, Lali Chowdhury, Kamu Mukherjee, Susmita Mukherjee, Subrata Sen Sharma, Jamuna Sinha, Hiralal, Jogesh Chatterjee, Satya Banerjee, Gopal Dey.

Chiriakhana ("The Zoo")
1967, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Saradindu Banerjee

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Star Productions
Cast includes: Uttam Kumar, Sailen Mukherjee, Susil Majumdar, Kanika Majumdar, Subhendu Chatterjee, Syamal Ghosal, Prasad Mukherjee, Subira Roy, Nripati Chatterjee, Subrata Chatterjee, Gitali Roy, Kalipada Chakravarti, Chinmoy Roy, Raman Mullick, Nilatpal Dey.

Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne ("The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha")
1968, Bengali, b & w
Based on a story by Upendrakishore Ray

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Purnima Pictures
Cast includes: Tapen Chatterjee, Robi Ghosh, Santosh Dutta, Jahar Roy, Santi Chatterjee, Harindranath Chatterjee, Chinmoy Roy, Durgadas Banerjee, Gobinda Chakravarti, Prasad Mukherjee, Haridhan Mukherjee, Abani Chatterjee, Khagen Pathak, Binoy Bose, Joykrishna Sanyal, Tarun Mitra, Ratan Banerjee, Kartik Chatterjee, Gopal Dey, Ajoy Banerjee, Sailen Ganguly, Moni Srimani.

Aranyer Din Ratri ("Days and Nights in the Forest")
1969, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Sunil Ganguli

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy

Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Priya Films
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Subhendu Chatterjee, Samit Bhanja, Robi Ghosh, Pahari Sanyal, Sarmila Tagore, Kaveri Bose, Simi Garewal, Aparna Sen.

Pratidwandi ("The Adversary")
1970, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Sunil Ganguli

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Priya Films
Cast includes: Dhritiman Chatterjee, Indira Devi, Debraj Roy, Krishna Bose, Kalyan Chowdhury, Joysree Roy, Sefali, Soven Lahiri, Pisu Majumdar, Dhara Roy, Mamata Chatterjee.

Seemabaddha ("Company Limited")
1971, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Shankar

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Chitranjali
Cast includes: Barun Chanda, Sarmila Tagore, Parumita Chowdhury, Harindranath Chatterjee, Haradhan Banerjee, Indira Roy, Promod.

Ashani Sanket ("Distant Thunder")
1973, Bengali, Colour
Based on the novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Balaka Movies
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Babita, Ramesh Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Gobinda Chakravarti, Sandhya Roy, Noni Ganguli, Seli Pal, Suchita Roy, Anil Ganguli, Debatosh Ghosh.

Sonar Kella ("The Golden Fortress")
1974, Bengali, Colour
Based on the novella by Satyajit Ray

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Government of West Bengal
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Santosh Dutta, Siddhartha Chatterjee, Kusal Chakravarti, Sailen Mukherjee, Ajoy Banerjee, Kamu Mukherjee, Santanu Bagchi, Harindranath Chatterjee, Sunil Sarkar, Siuli Mukherjee, Haradhan Banerjee, Rekha Chatterjee, Asok Mukherjee, Bimal Chatterjee

Jana Aranya ("The Middle Man")
1975, Bengali, b & w
Based on the novel by Shankar

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy

Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Indus Films
Cast includes: Pradip Mukherjee, Satya Banerjee, Dipankar Dey, Lily Chakravarti, Aparna Sen, Gautam Chakravarti, Sudesna Das, Utpal Dutt, Robi Ghosh, Bimal Chatterjee, Arati Bhattacharya, Padma Devi, Soven Lahiri, Santosh Dutta, Bimal Deb, Ajeya Mukherjee, Kalyan Sen, Alokendu Dey

Shatranj Ke Khilari ("The Chess Players")
1977, Hindi, Colour
Based on the short story by Premchand

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Bansi Chandragupta
Produced by: Devki Chitra Productions
Cast includes: Sanjeev Kumar, Saeed Jaffrey, Amjad Khan, Richard Attenborough, Shabana Azmi, Farida Jalal, Veena, David Abraham, Victor Banerjee, Farooq Shaikh, Tom Alter, Leela Mishra, Barry John, Samarth Narain, Budho Advani, Kamu Mukherjee.

Jay Baba Felunath ("The Elephant God")
1978, Bengali, Colour
Based on the novel by Satyajit Ray

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose

Produced by: R. D. Bansal and Co.
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Santosh Dutta, Siddhartha Chatterjee, Utpal Dutt, Jit Bose, Haradhan Banerjee, Bimal Chatterjee, Biplab Chatterjee, Satya Banerjee, Moloy Roy, Santosh Sinha, Manu Mukherjee, Indubhusan Gujral, Kamu Mukherjee.

Hirak Rajar Deshe ("The Kingdom of Diamonds")
1980, Bengali, Colour

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Government of West Bengal
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Utpal Dutt, Tapen Chatterjee, Robi Ghosh, Santosh Dutta, Promod Ganguli, Alpana Gupta, Rabin Majumdar, Sunil Sarkar, Nani Ganguli, Ajoy Banerjee, Kartik Chatterjee, Haridhan Mukherjee, Bimal Deb, Tarun Mitra, Gopal Dey, Sailen Ganguli, Samir Mukherjee.

Sadgati ("Deliverance")
1981, Bengali, Colour
Based on the short story by Premchand

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Doordarshan
Cast includes: Om Puri, Smita Patil, Richa Mishra, Mohan Agashe, Gita Siddhartha, Bhaialal Hedao

Ghare Baire ("The Home and the World")
1984, Bengali, Colour
Based on the novel by Rabindranath Tagore

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Soumendu Roy
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: National Film Development Corporation of India
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Victor Banerjee, Swatilekha Chatterjee, Gopa Aich, Jennifer Kapoor, Manoj Mitra, Indrapramit Roy, Bimal Chatterjee.

Ganashatru ("An Enemy of the People")
1989, Bengali, Colour
Based on the play by Henrik Ibsen

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Barun Raha
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: National Film Development Corporation of India
Cast includes: Soumitra Chatterjee, Ruma Guha Thakurta, Mamata Shankar, Dhritiman Chatterjee, Dipankar Dey, Subhendu Chatterjee, Manoj Mitra, Viswa Guha Thakurta, Rajaram Yagnik, Satya Banerjee, Gobinda Mukherjee.

Shakha Prashakha ("Branches of a Tree")
1990, Bengali, Colour

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Barun Raha
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: Satyajit Ray Productions (India), Gerard Depardieu and Daniel Toscan Du Planter (Paris)
Cast includes: Pramod Ganguli, Ajit Banerjee, Soumitra Chatterjee, Haradhan Banerjee, Dipankar Dey, Ranjit Mullick, Mamata Shankar, Lily Chakravarti.

Agantuk ("The Stranger")
1991, Bengali, Colour

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Camera: Barun Raha
Music: Satyajit Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art director: Asok Bose
Produced by: National Film Development Corporation of India
Cast includes: Utpal Dutt, Dipankar Dey, Mamata Shankar, Bikram Bhattacharya, Robi Ghosh, Dhritiman Chatterjee, Subrata Chatterjee, Promod Ganguli, Ajit Banerjee.

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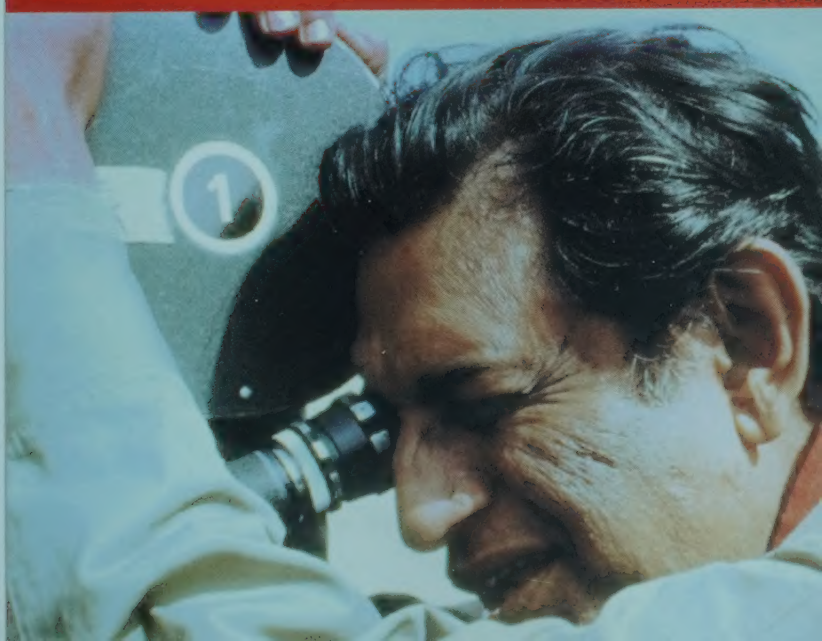

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